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Academy banquet, in his outburst of rhetoric
about the landscapes of the year. "On that
canvas," he said, "the uncanny sun sinks down
in blood behind the fön." And so it does, but we
doubt very much whether, as a landscape, the
picture deserves to rank higher than a multitude
of other clever experiments made by figure-painters
in a realm which is not their own. *Commonplace*

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THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

II

A novel very far above the average, both in design and in execution, is *The Dailys of Soddan Fen*: by the author of "Four Crotchets to a Bar" (Richard Bentley and Son), wherein the author has aimed high and has gone very near the mark. Persons, places, scenes, ideas, choice of subject, style of writing, all are out of the common, all have the charm of originality and freshness. Terrible and even revolting as the catastrophe is, it is quite in accordance with dramatic propriety and with what is called poetical justice. The contrast between the characters of James Daily the father, and Adam Daily, the son, is admirably worked out; the portrait of Susan Daily is a gem; the sketches of the children are delightful; the picture of Jessie is charming beyond measure; the purpose of the story is noble and worthily set forth. James Daily is a poor tiler and thatcher, of Slumsby, in the fens of Lincolnshire; he believes himself to have "rights" which date from the seventeenth century, when Dutchmen came over to drain our fens; and he spends his life in sullen work and brooding over the injustice, which, as he holds, prevents him from being the owner of Soddan Fen. His claim is based upon his name and his undoubted descent from a certain Daily who had reclaimed the land from the waters, and who had died a martyr's death at the hands of his mistaken compatriots and neighbours. The story of this martyrdom is told with much power and pathos. But, even if James Daily were the martyr's heir, the very same tradition that admitted the heirship held that, so far as Soddan Fen was concerned, it had been given by the martyr as a common possession for ever to the villagers of Slumsby. Meanwhile, the property, or a great part of it, is enjoyed neither by the villagers nor by James Daily, but by a member of the prolific and well-known family of Smith. How Adam Daily, eldest son of James, is educated by the incomparable Jessie into a hero; how he becomes master of the property to which his family have so long considered themselves to have a claim; and how he disappoints and infuriates his less unselfish father by a Quixotic use of the ownership, is to be discovered

by anyone who cares to have the pleasure of reading an unusually meritorious novel. The story is not intensely interesting throughout, but in the main it is something better than merely interesting, and is altogether a very creditable performance.

Mr. Samuel C. Vane

"The Dailys of Soddan Fen" (3 vols., Richard Bentley and Son), by the author of "Four Crotchets to a Bar," is a remarkable and interesting book. It bears very little resemblance to the clever but eccentric story by the same author which preceded it, and is a great advance upon it. The lines of construction are simple and large, they have been clearly laid down in the author's mind, and they advance towards the developed end with gradual and natural transitions which are so skilfully managed that the reader is scarcely aware until he reaches it how extensive the ground is over which he has been carried.

The writer understands the silent passion of the people for the land, their deep—sometimes unconscious—sense of wrongful alienation from it, and his sympathy has informed his tale with strong and serious interest. In a sense it might be called a political novel—the sense in which politics are distinct from party. But there is also the lighter touch which brightens a story of serious interest into romance. Aurea Chapel, the girl of the lovely golden locks, is charmingly drawn. Her vacillations between her three lovers, her childish egotism and selfishness which only become hard and unlovely in adversity, her comfort in her own beauty, are amusingly conceived. Describing her past troubles to her friend Jessie, Aurea says: "I had got nothing to support me at all except my hair. And even that was not half the comfort that you might have thought." The reader is very glad to leave Aurea sheltered from every danger, even from that of her own shallow nature.

'The Daily News.'

THE TIMES,

RECENT NOVELS.

"The Dailys of Sodden Fen." By the author of "Four Crochets to a Bar" (Bentley and Son). The merit of this novel consists in its portraiture of rural life and manners. The Dailys are an interesting family, and not the less interesting because Daily, the father, an humble thatcher, has "a bee in his bonnet" concerning some land reclaimed from the fens by an ancestor of the same name, but which has since come into the hands of the squire.

But as long as he is in Daily's cottage the author is always entertaining. He has a turn for rustic epigram which reminds us faintly of George Eliot. There is a capital scene in the work-house (where Grandam Daily resides, and where Daily's father and grandfather before him have ended their days), which must have been studied from the life.

So, too, the brief descriptions of fen scenery are vivid and natural. But when the author diverges into moralizing, or analyses of character, the language becomes sometimes laboured and rugged. To those who appreciate studies of village life this story of the fen-lands may be safely recommended.

"THE DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN," by the Author of "Four Crochets to a Bar," three vols. (Bentley and Son), is a story of the Fens, and introduces the reader to a very novel phase of life; and there are certainly few who will not be irresistibly attracted by a romantic picture which is for the most part very true to nature.

While the minor characters are for the most part somewhat shadowy and unreal, the book shows signs of real power, and we shall await with interest the next novel by the same author.

The Standard.

"The Dailys of Sodden Fen." By the author of "Four Crotchets to a Bar," &c. Three Vols. R. Bentley and Son.—In 1650, a certain Dyggorie Dailie, who had drained and reclaimed some marshes in the English fen country, was murdered before the altar in the parish church as he stood there to tell the people what he had done for them, and not for himself; for the lands that he had rescued were to be handed over to the village of Slumsby, "as common ground, for all time to come and for ever." And a cross was raised over his grave, and on it was engraved—"Hic expiravit pro populo mortuus."

We do not know that we quite understand the writer's views about inheritance and the rights of the commons; but we do know that the "Dailys of Sodden Fen" is a novel of rare merit. If we say nothing of Aurea Chapel and her three lovers, it is because we regard her and them as harmless excrescences on the story—the necessary ballast to trim a three-volume novel. If we say little or nothing of Jessie Apers Smith, who is a woman of rare nobleness and charm, it is because we could hardly speak of her without telling more of the story than it is fair to tell.

"The Dailys of Sodden Fen' is well equipped. The characters are original, and there is plenty of variety; the author's grasp of his purpose is firm; the study of men and things is close and trustworthy; the insight into human nature is deep; and the sympathy with human suffering is true; and, besides all this, there is a freshness of subject-matter, an independence of treatment, and a sustained strength of dramatic interest, which will make a book full of attraction for the cultivated and thoughtful, reach and hold even the ordinary reader. Looked at from whatever point of view, 'The Dailys of Sodden Fen' is simply a brilliant success, and we have no fear that the public will fail to justify this verdict."

THE DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN. By the Author of "Four Crotchets to a Bar," &c. Three vols.

"If George Eliot be dead, the happy example she set of high-class literature, sterling good writing, and first-rate work, is not lost, but finds a fit exponent in the author of 'The Dailys of Sodden Fen.' . . . The scene is laid in the fen country, and the characters which mainly people the story are those of tilers and thatchers and their equals, but depicted with such artistic skill as is rarely met with in fiction nowadays."—*Whitehall Review*.

THE DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN.

"The Dailys of Sodden Fen." By the author of "Four Crotchets to a Bar." Three vols. (Richard Bentley and Son.) This novel is made up of two parts, which have little more than an accidental connection between them. There is the story of "Sodden Fen," part of the region drained by Cornelius Vermuyden and his associates, and there is the love-story of George Akers, vicar of this Lincolnshire parish. The first story is not, we suppose, without some socio-political meaning. "Sodden Fen" becomes the property of the labourers of the parish, and is to be thenceforward a paradise of "small culture." It is not within our province to give an opinion on the economical merits of this arrangement, though we may say in passing that the labourer can hardly be worse off than he is now, even if he is weighted by what some economists so earnestly deprecate on his behalf—the possession of two or three acres. But we may say that there is some improbability, not to say absurdity, in the development of events which are made to lead up to this result, and yet that the story as a whole cannot fail to impress the reader. The Dailys, father and son, the one brooding over the sense of right denied him, till his soul is filled with madness, the other with his simple, clear-eyed, unfaltering sense of duty, are fine studies. And the whole picture of the Daily household is a striking one. The writer has studied this peasant life and knows it, and makes it so real in description that the effect is not spoiled by the setting of dubious romance in which she has chosen to present it. The minor plot of

the novel, the loves of the Rev. George Akers, shows merits of quite another kind. There is no common skill shown in the drawing of Anna Chapel; the limitations of a nature which is capable of rising to a certain height and incapable of rising further present no easy subject, and the writer has handled it well. We feel that this Anna, so unworthy as she is of George Akers's honest love, is a poor creature, and yet acknowledge that she has a certain strength of her own, and can fill what ~~after~~ ^{after} ~~is a~~ ^{is a} small part in the world with no little satisfaction to others as well as to herself. "The Dailys of Sodden Fen" has certain mannerisms and a general "viewiness" which may become perilous, but it is a clever and promising piece of work.

Gazette. "THE DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN."

THIS is a really fine novel in design; and the execution is of a high order, with a just and impressive catastrophe. The reader would probably be glad to dispense with the services of Aurea Chapel, without whom, however, the cubic measure of the three volumes would be very noticeably diminished; but scarcely any other character could be spared, so new and refreshing are nearly all the fictitious beings whom the novelist has summoned from the recesses of imagination. New, too, is the scenery, new the subject, new the scope, and new the style of treatment. The fortunes of a pair of lovers do not—for once—claim attention to the exclusion of most other matters. Lovers, in the present case, may be said, in American parlance, to take a back seat. And yet, if ever there were a heroine for whom worthy men should have been willing to fight twelve hours by Shrewsbury clock, such a heroine is the enthusiastic Jessie. The reason, of course, why she does not have as many suitors as Penelope is that she is known from the beginning of the novel to have a husband somewhere; unless, indeed, he may have perished "unknown," in a miserable fashion worthy of his miserable career. True, that was also, to a certain extent, the condition of the persistently wooed Penelope herself; but England of to-day is not Ithaca of Odyssean times, and English suitors now are not as Ithacan suitors were then. And so Jessie is left in comparative peace, to lighten the parish with the charm of her presence; to comfort the soul of the old man who is her father-in-law, though neither of them knows it; to lecture her amiable brother into activity; and, most wonderful of all things, to bring out the dormant good in Adam Daily until he is developed into a conspicuous example of Nature's noblemen. Terrible as his end is, it was artistically correct to let him die at the moment of his triumph; and, horrible as it is that he should lose his life by the hand of him to whom he owed it, there is undoubtedly a dramatic fitness in the awful consummation. The family of the Dailys, one and all, are conceived with great originality and sketched with remarkable vigour and skill; and that is a very happy and characteristic touch whereby each of the twelve children is represented to have had the name of a month, from January to December in order, for second Christian name. Altogether the novel is of an undoubtedly superior stamp.

MORNING POST.

"A powerfully written tale; while possessing the interest of a romance, enters into the discussion of many social problems."

ACADEMY.

"The love passages between the thoroughly real, amiable, and worldly Aurea Chapel and her third and final 'fate' form a piece of sunny comedy incomparably superior to what passes muster as the humorous by-play of ordinary fiction."

S. C. Venn

THE
DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'FOUR CROTCHETS TO A BAR,' ETC.

'And in the meadows, which before were deep Lakes and drowned Fenns, by excluding the River, he found them fruitful fields, and as good ground as could be wished : Nay, of the very Pitts and Bogs, he thereby made a Garden of Pleasure.'

DUGDALE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

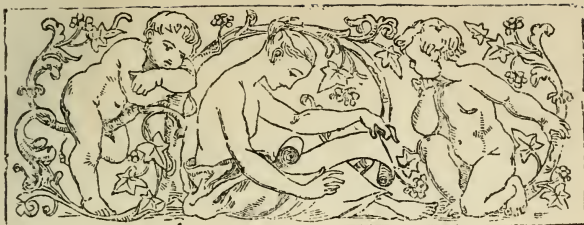


LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1884.
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To 'The Dailys of Sodden Fen,' more than to most of the good novels which have recently seen the light, a somewhat trivial and colourless expression may be fitly applied. In virtue of its subject, of its boldly drawn characters, of its descriptions and manner of treatment, it is pre-eminently readable. For central subject we have a reclaimed fen, with a descendant of the original reclamer who is possessed by a monomaniacal idea that the land ought to be his own, and another descendant in whom the moral grandeur of his ancestor comes out after the lapse of two hundred years. The story throws light upon a district which has not been worked, or at any rate not overworked, by previous writers of fiction; and the picture here presented, though it is stippled in with laborious care rather than painted with the free hand of a master, is a thoroughly pleasant piece of work. As for the characters, the whole family of the Dailys are English to the backbone—vertebrate fen-folk, whose good yeoman's blood reasserts itself with gathered power after a sleep of several generations. The subsidiary characters are less successful, though not without merit in their various degrees. Some of them are racy, all more or less natural; but the strength of the book is in the family above named. Few more weird figures will be found in contemporary fiction than that of James Daily, as he sat night after night crouched on the thatch of his cottage, brooding over the dim prospect of Sodden Fen, which he has sworn never to enter except as the recognized owner. The keeping of his vow, the manner of his release, the long nursing of his insane greed

and envy and fancied wrongs, are told with masculine power—which is by no means the same thing as saying by a male writer. If this novel is not one of the most vigorous which have appeared within the last year or two, it has elements of vigour in conception and execution which entitle it to much consideration. There are inequalities which would have been avoided by an author of higher literary capacity; but the discerning reader will not fail to observe many indications of the best qualities that a novelist can possess.

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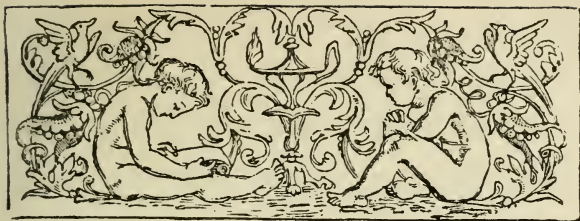


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J. C. Kew.



THE DAILYS OF SODDEN FEN.

INTRODUCTORY.

FROM the Dutch engineer, Cornelius Vermuyden, who, in the middle of the seventeenth century, undertook to drain the English fenlands, to Adam January Daily, the thatcher's son, who, some two centuries later, first trod the peat-bogs by the margin of 'Diggory's Dyke,' the descent might seem greater than that indicated by the mere lapse of years.

Adam January Daily, at the latter period, dwelt with his father, mother, and eleven brothers and sisters, in an obscure cottage, valued at a yearly rental of four pounds sterling, in the remote village of Slumsby in the Lincolnshire levels. Sir Cornelius Vermuyden, more than two centuries earlier, had obtained the royal sanction for the draining of these levels. Any connection between points so remote might appear at the outset as distinctly the work of imagination as would a psychological memoir of Sir Cornelius himself if written by a biographer of the nineteenth century. None the less it is certain that could some retrospective process be performed, similar to that problematic undertaking by which a spider's web would be unravelled backwards, Cornelius Vermuyden would be found to be the spot located somewhere at the heart of the

web whence were woven the fortunes of Adam January Daily. Whilst observant of the issues and cognisant, perhaps, of the origin of any given agency in the history of an individual or a nation, it is often impossible to trace its successive developments, drawing out each thread to its fullest length, gossamer by unbroken gossamer ; in default therefore of such an interminable undertaking, let us transport ourselves at once to Vermuyden's side at the centre of the events in question.'

There were days in which it must be confessed that Holland, and not Britannia, appeared to 'rule the waves.' Vermuyden left a country of sedate and solid 'drainers, who had long ago reckoned with and paid off their earlier tyrant, King Flood. He came to a dreary waste of fen, where, 'in bogs of huge and hideous bignesse,' that

monarch's rule was slavishly accepted by an amphibious race. A race, too, of that saddest sort of Conservative, the churl whose experience of change has taught him that it can but be for the worse.

In the Great Level, so frequently inundated, Vermuyden found a rough and savage set of people, living on their wild-fowl and their fish, catching the latter not unfrequently on the floors of their hovels, when the waters subsided after an inundation ; knocking over the former, upon the roofs of their cabins, with the poles which they used for wading in the marshes, when repletion, and not hunger, had rendered the feathered creatures tame. Clad in a half-tanned jerkin sodden to the sickly hue of a toad's under-surface, covered with a spongy sheepskin rotten from contact with the reeking osiers whereon it made their bed at

nights, Vermuyden and his associates found the Fen-men cutting sedge, driving wild geese, digging 'hassocks' for fuel, all in an aimless and desultory way, much hindered therein by the inevitable fen-agues, marsh-fevers, asthmas, rheumatisms, and hunger-pangs.

The foreign undertakers offered these starvelings employment—nay, they impressed them into the service of their new drainage-works, at a rate of wages calculated, so it was contemptuously said, by a Dutch measure, and not paid then; service being enforced by alien overseers carrying arms. But if the abject commoners were slaves, they were willing bondmen only to the ills they knew. Their short-sighted eyes, blinded by the mists and sea-fogs, saw no promise of ultimate gain in present loss. They refused to dry up their fens.

What! in order to produce pastures for the Dutchman and the French Protestants who crowded in his train, must they dig and drain and drip with the fetid moisture of fen water, mingling with the ready sweat of ill-fed labour! What! destroy their own fish, scare away their own fowl, parch the suckers of their willows, shrink the acreage of their peat-fuel, stave in the flat bottoms of their fishing skerries, and render their women homeless! All for what? When all was dried and done, was it the Fen-man who would profit by the altered proportions of land and water? Was it the Fen-man who would fatten cattle on the fresh green meadows? Was it he who would trot to market on sleek roadsters along the newly erected causeways? Not he. It would be the Dutchmen and the English courtiers who would gain the rescued lands,

of which they had already secured large grants in advance. No ; let the Fen-man yield up his reed-thatched and wattle-covered hovel to make room for the cattle-stalls and the farming homesteads of the immigrants, and then let him crawl in his sheepskin farther east to the 'Wash,' and there drown ! Not yet, however, for the Fen-man knew a device capable of outwitting all the purchased genius, all the borrowed science, and all the usurers' wealth that ever crossed the ocean.

In olden days the offence of dyke-breaking held in these districts a place in the annals of popular crime, analogous to that blacker one now occupied by the malicious production of railway accidents. The mean and cowardly wretch who now, at the minimum risk and trouble to himself, places a sleeper across a line, then took a pick-axe

and, under cover of a marsh fog or of a moonless night, wrought a weak place in the side of a dyke, covered it lightly with loosened earth, and left it to burst at the next rising of the waters. Thousands of acres were thus frequently reduced to their pristine condition, and the labour and expense of years were squandered in an hour.

A venerable Act of Parliament enacts that ‘Whereas divers evil-disposed personnes of their perverse and evill dispositions maliciously at divers and sundry times, have cut, cast down, and broken up, divers parts of the Dykes ; and also by reason of the same waters much people have been drowned in their beds, within their houses, and have lost the most part of their goods, for reformation of the same it is ordayned, enacted, and established that the said offenders

be proceeded against with like judgement and execution that the Justices have used and accustomed to do, upon other Felonies, being Felony at the common law.' And there seems little reason to doubt that by a statute more ancient still, but stated by some to have been actually enforced, the guilty wretch so caught was condemned, after being suitably excommunicated, to be neatly embedded alive in the fissure which he had created. A literal method this of making a man stop up his own gap. History is, it must be confessed, discreetly reticent on the subject of this remarkable document. Its provisions are alleged to have been conceived in the brain of a certain abbot, renowned for sanctity of person and for inspiration of judgment. In his monastery on the Nene, or the Welland, the only copy extant might be

seen until it was destroyed at the sacking of the religious houses during the Reformation ; the original document having already perished in the Great Fire of London, together with many other valuable and instructive parchments relating to the literature of the Fens.

Tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had, however, no doubt as to the validity of this notable charter. In proof of such conviction, the fact was brought forward that several dykes popularly credited with such repair, held good during sundry remarkable floods, when all other water-walls were falling around them. Indisputable evidence this, since all the Fen world knew that ‘a dyke that was mended with a man never broke’! ✕

To return to Vermuyden.

Everywhere the commoners of the Fen

*‘a dyke that was bolched with a
boor never broke.’*

harassed the new-comers, destroyed their windmills, killed their cattle, burnt their newly-sown crops, cut across their embankments, undermined their dams, tore down their banks, opened their sluices at high-water, shut them at low, and brought the water upon them as fast as they drained it off or built it out.

Now, as they stood upon the defensive, with rusty old matchlocks that would not go off, muttering curses between their teeth, the Fen-men bethought them of their own peculiar recipe. Not without the sense of a grim joke, tempered by superstitious afterthought that a good old English custom must be honoured in the pious observance, did the Fen-man stuff a stout burgher or two into the walls of the newly-erected dykes. Then he bit his thumbs, declared the spot to be haunted by unclean ghosts,

and waited to see what would happen next.

Their ally, the fever-fiend, fought on the side of the Fen-men—lucky accident was always ready to be impressed into their service. The emissary of progress was caught in a sluice, choked in a drain, felled by a quag-pole, or burnt in his holding : rarely was he killed in actual conflict. Open war was resorted to by the rebellious commoner only at the last extremity. His neighbours were too scattered, and his own resources too precarious.

Many an enterprising citizen, who had gone over from the Hague in hopes of profit, perished ignominiously in these English levels ; and ominously across the waters words such as these were carried :
' A dyke that is botched with a Boor is aye sure !'

Contemptuous sepulture of a dishonoured foe was all that the Fen-man could probably be charged with ; but it was whispered in the Hague that these men had been buried ere the breath was out of their bodies, and in many a snug box-bed in Zealand, Dutch children hid their scared round eyes and shuddered at the too graphic story, told upon the hearthstone, of the agonies of the embedded drainer ; of that decent citizen built up alive in that savage country beyond the seas, never to come home to dear comfortable Holland any more.

Had not an old chronicler of their own stated that the English Fenlands were ‘mostly full of devils—as witness the sufferings of the blessed St. Guthlac’? Devils incarnate, so the Dutchmen found them. Even so less dangerous possibly

than the fever-fiend, to whom the modern critic attributes the experiences of that holy man when, in remote days, having taken up his unwise abode in Crowland, he found it to be 'a place of horror and great solitude, where black troops of unclean spirits filled the air with dark clouds, and with mighty shrieks were heard to roar, till, by-and-by, rushing into the house, they first bound the holy saint, then drew him out of his cell and cast him over head and ears into the dirty Fen.' St. Guthlac lived to tell the tale; there were Dutchmen less holy and less fortunate.

Cornelius Vermuyden was, however, a man not to be easily beaten. With him, in his thankless task in the southern portion of the Great Level, this Dutch Sisyphus associated thirteen enterprising gentlemen—mostly Dutch, but partly English; holding

the Englishmen chiefly, it must be confessed, by the lapels of their embroidered waistcoats, the natives of Holland by their leather pouches. These men wrote their names in water ; yet, in so doing, they rescued them strangely from oblivion. They liberally bestowed their own cognomens upon the waters of the ‘Eau,’ or of the ‘Dyke,’ or of the ‘Leam,’ the construction of which had secured them in possession of the adjacent lands thus redeemed from submersion, and, contrary to popular dictum, the streams to which they confided them have safely transmitted their titles to posterity.

One man, and one only, seems to have whispered his name to those level floods in vain. The osier-beds and the bulrushes by the margins of the meres heard the syllables only to forget them ; the sycophant Fame

played him false, too busy, so the story ran, in trumpeting the names of his decorated associates. But in the village of Slumsby, tradition, that voice of the uncultivated many, asserts that vulgar ears heard, rude lips repeated, and uneducated memories retained, the sound of the name by which the last and the least of the fen-draining heros was known.

Amongst the old folk at 'Dripping Ferry,' in the infirmary of Cutthorpe Union, and amongst the Slumsby cottages, the tale was told for generations that Diggory's Dyke, on the borders of 'Sodden Fen,' indicated the western limits of the portion originally belonging to one 'Dyggerie Dailie'—so the name was first spelt—as his share in the allotment of lands made at the expiration of Vermuyden's later contract.

Sir Philip and Sir Robert and the Earl,

the Doctor and the Justice and the Esquire yet lived in history—so the people held—whilst poor ‘Dyggorie Dailie’ had died, simply because he had been a man of their class. A yeoman, inheriting his reeking homestead in the very midst of the reedy Fens, finding the necessary outlay for his arduous task only with narrow economy, which reduced his mode of life to the condition of that of the commoners around him, Dailie had taken up the draining project solely as the champion of his poorer neighbours ; espousing their cause less against the encroachments of the waters to which they were accustomed, than of other invaders less welcome to the soil. He was a man, rude and unconciliatory of speech to the great, capable only of good work for the land.

In the great floods of the year 1814 there

were old people in Slumsby who loved to point out that whilst other districts were two feet or more below the surface, the rich peat acres bordered by 'Diggory's Dyke' and 'Sodden Leam' turned their black faces unsubmerged up to the weeping heavens. Not 'Dailie's Eau,' mind, or any other such foreign appellation; but plain 'Diggory's Dyke,' as though spoken lovingly of some member of one's own family, of one's own brother, whose surname nobody could want to be told.

Diggory's Dyke withstood the onslaught of the waters for reasons more than one. There was a dark tale told about that fatal trench, which long distinguished it in the eyes of the country-folk from all other dykes, drains, lodes, or eaus for sixty miles around. As gathered from an ancient chronicle, it runs thus:

‘ Upon the feast-day of St. Elene, in the month of May, in the year A.D. 1650, did honest Dyggorie Dailie, Dike Reeve of the Hundred of South Holland in Lincolnshire ’ (now a Dike-Reeve is and was a man, and not a bird—one appointed for the over-looking of dykes and ditches), ‘ complete a strong sluice of wood which he had caused to be made upon the river, in the parts whereabouts lay his own holding, which he had inherited from his forefathers. This sluice he builded of a sufficient height and breadth for the defence of the tides coming from the sea, and likewise against the fresh waters descending ; excluding the river with a mighty bank, because every year almost all these meadows lying near unto that stream were overflowed with the continued inundations thereof. For which reason this place called “ Sodden ” had first

that name; *id est*, “a rotten fen.” And erecting upon that bank divers tenements and a water-mill, did Dyggorie Dailie in a short time make it a common ground, whereunto he designed of his own bounty gardens and arable fields; and thus by banking the said river reduced those low grounds, which were before that time deep lakes and impassable fens, into most fruitful fields and pastures, and the most humid and moorish parts thereof to a garden of pleasure; and performed the same upon his free good will and charity for the ease of his country.

‘Thence going through the market-place of Cutthorpe, he repaired to the parish church of St. Stephen in that same town to render thanks for the Divine aid in this his late painful undertaking. For a principal assembly was at that period held yearly

within the month of May, at which every man within the bounds of the said parishes must contribute his portion for the lawful quantity of his holding of common, or pasture, and fishing. Such payment having been ordained to be made by order of the sheriffs of this present time in the church of St. Stephen on the feast of St. Elene, a large number of the people were there present most grudgingly to pay their hardly-earned taxes, as also the lords of the townships, the landowners, the deputy-sheriff, the clergy, bailiffs, and so forth. Which business being hardly put through by reason of the poverty and the disaffection of the people, in view of the late troubles did Dailie hear the common bailiff from the steps of the altar publish this order of decree of the Lords in Parliament, that "For the preventing of mischief, and for the preservation

of the peace of the county, the Shireves of Lincolne should punctually pursue the statutes made in the thirteenth year of King Henry IV., for the suppressing of riots and routs ; and should call to their assistance, if need required, the trained bands and the Parliament forces to the aiding and assisting in guarding the sluices and sewers, and in repairing what had of late been of wilful malice destroyed."

‘ Which order being so published, the angry congregation did as one man arise and force the said bailiff out from thence, as also the deputy-sheriff, the itinerant justices of the peace, the clergy, and other participants there present, telling them that they should not come there again except they were stronger than they. They likewise ejected all such as were foreigners, bidding them swim away like ducks back to their own land.

‘But while they thus comported themselves, Dailie rose up from his seat in their midst, and ascending the steps of the altar, by fair representation and prudent words sought to calm his neighbours, telling them of the work which he had even now completed of his own good accord in the village of Slumsby, hard by, for the draining of Sodden Fen. “Forasmuch, also, as they ought for the public benefit to take care and provide against the perils, dangers, and intolerable losses there hapning by the river’s inundations, and to prevent the like for the time to come, he counselled that, together with himself and his heirs, they would, for the future, repair their own banks and watergangs according to the quantity of their land, as it should be the custom of the country, without any intervention of foreign undertakers, or any contest or contradiction for ever.”

‘ Furthermore, he urged that “the inhabitants of those parts, imitating the good husbandry of those in other countryes who had by banking and drayning made good improvements in such fenny places, should begin to do the like there ; bidding them to appoint certain of their own number as constituted commissioners to view and repair those banks and ditches as had been made to that purpose, and were then grown to some decay.”

‘ But even while this honest man so delivered himself of these wholesome words, standing with his face to the congregation, upon the steps of the altar, whence but now the angry folk had thrust the said bailiff or beadle, a strong company of those that heard him rushed from the church, and joining themselves with above two hundred other disaffected commoners coming out of

the spacious fens, in the reeds and thickets whereof they hid themselves, did pull down another sluice near that town, which occasioned the river to break down the banks and overflow the greater part of the whole level ; so that barns and stacks of hay were drowned a yard deep at the least. And thinking this not to be mischief enough, they did tumultuously throw down a great part of the banks and filled up the ditches, putting in cattle into the springing corn of those that had been adventurers for the draining. They also demolished very many holdings, burnt others, cut and burned the ploughs, beat and wounded those that were ploughing.

‘Now as Dyggorie Dailie stood still and spake, with his face towards the open porch of the church, there came one turbulent and disaffected fellow mounted on the deputy-

sheriff's own mare, which he had taken from under that worthy gentleman as he fled the sacred building, having robbed him and beaten him to the earth where he even now lay groaning. This fellow, causing the unwilling mare wantonly to trample on the green mounds of the dead, drew bridle for a moment between the yew-tree which even now standeth in Cutthorpe churchyard and the elms which budded then as now. For a second's space these two, the honest yeoman and the mutinous Fen-man, each fronted the other silently; and the pause of sound was filled with the cawing of the rooks above their heads in the spring sunshine, and the screaming of the jackdaws in the stone tower. Then, pulling heavily at the mare's mouth, the rider urged her all reluctantly through the open doorway, up the aisles of the church, where the muddy floor, inlaid

with scanty gravestones, made the animal's hoofs ring now sharply as upon the dried bones of the dead, now with dull thuds as upon down-trodden flesh and blood.

‘Then at the eastern extremity of the church the rider paused, levelling the loaded musket in his hand full in the face of Dyggorie Dailie; for by reason of the height of the stone steps of the chancel these two men fronted each other eye to eye.

‘There, maligning him for a traitor to his country and his neighbours, and casting in his teeth his service with the undertaker for the draining of his land in Slumsby village, this ringleader of the malcontents (himself a turbulent and disaffected spirit, having been bred a Quaker), bade him, under threat of instant death, to mount behind him on the sheriff's mare, and with his own hands

to undo, pull down and destroy the sluice which he had raised on the westernmost border of Soddan Fen ; by which means that land had been by him, Dailie, recovered from the waters, to his own personal profit and to the asserted loss of the speaker, as well as of other dwellers in the Fens, in fishing and fowling.

‘ Then, as when upon disturbance of some passing stranger, skein above skein the fen-fowl rise whirling through the air, screaming, piping, clacking, croaking, so voice above voice the clangour rang. The men of Cutthorpe joining those of Slumsby in maligning their common benefactor, stirring the peaceful echoes in the arching roofs with their harsh utterances, until the very jack-daws, opening their coarse beaks, joined in the vulgar chorus. A being who could so far forget himself as to procure his fellows’

good ere they had claimed it as such, must be an object of ludicrous contempt ; a mere boggart set up for the derision of all possessed of common-sense, whether amongst birds or bipeds, for nothing so inflates the vanity of a vulgar nature, or so stirs its derisive contempt for another, as a service rendered before it is sought.

‘ Silently Dyggorie Dailie stood, until from words they had passed to blows ; then from his leather wallet he brought forth a purse, and in the instant hush of expectation following the significant action, he displayed it empty. Then flinging it on the time-worn pavement at his feet—

“ ‘ There,” quoth he, “ men and neighbours, lies all the gain that ever has accrued or shall accrue to me or mine from the draining of Sodden Fen. Now, purse for purse,” cried he. “ In mine you shall find neither token

nor placket. Not one doit have I touched from the hands of the Dutch. I demand now that that miscreant fling down also the purse which is weighting the mare's saddle with the taxes of which he hath lightened the deputy-sheriff. For this fellow's benefit will you be distrained of your goods and of your cattle, having duly paid your proportions with the wanes for the profit of the bailiffs? Think you, will the sheriff of the county suffer the exchequer to be robbed of its dues in these payments? Will you be held innocent of this man's treachery if the deputy-sheriff lies robbed and murdered?"

'Upon this there arose a fearful tumult in the holy place, some rushing to seize the rider's ill-gotten gains, which were scattered in all directions despite his appealing unto the people; others yelling, "Down with

Dailie ! To death with the dishonest yeoman who has taken the pay of the Dutch devils !”

‘ Then once more above the uproar might be heard the clear voice of Dyggorie Dailie ; for he was a man who could ever send his commands farther across a reed-bed in a howling storm, whilst the dusky alders creaked around him, than another man in a windless noon. A clear conscience, moreover, makes the utterance calm.

“ Neighbours !” he said, “ I take you to witness on the steps of this altar, that Sodden Fen, which I have redeemed from the western limit to the eastern leam, has been to my utter ruin and undoing so redeemed. Mine, and all that I have, I sold to the lord of this fee that I might find the wherewithal to rescue these lands for the use of the village of Slumsby as common ground,

whereon they might dig fuel and drive their feathered flocks, for all time to come and for ever! For my own shelter only have I reserved the water-mill which I have builded, at a cost of twenty pounds coin of this realm, on the south-eastern corner of the said fen, hard by the sluice which I have but now completed. There I would live with my wife and my son, by the aid of the winds of the Lord to work the mill for the common weal, earning our victuals as the poor around us use to do."

'Again a silence fell upon the people; and there were some standing there who noted that whilst Dailie spoke he seemed to raise his head as high as the face of the angel on the chancel screen, whilst he cast his eyes so low when he spoke of his son, that they seemed to rest with love on the children of some of the poorest Fen-men there present,

whose heads scarce reached to the height of the mare's tail.

‘Then, on a sudden, the northern door of the church was burst violently open, and there rushed into their midst men covered with mud-stains and blood, who with curses told that Dyggorie's mill was burnt down, that his sluice was battered in pieces, that his son was mauled whilst he was ploughing, that the deputy-sheriff was dead, and the bailiff ducked for his wanes.

‘The mounted Fen-man then waxing bolder, bade Dyggorie Dailie once more mount behind him and ride to his own village, where with his own hands he should breach the Western Ditch, now alone remaining : and with one voice the fickle folk joined in the same with oaths and cursing.

‘Dyggorie Dailie had played the traitor !
Dyggorie Dailie had signed the contract

with the Dutch devils! Dyggorie Dailie had dried the land to his own profit and their loss in fishing and fowling! What would become of the reed-cutters? what of the tanners and the boatmen, if such miscreants as this were to be tolerated? The chief justice and the doctor and the earl had already reaped their share in the profits; was Dailie the latest contractor for nought? was not each man to receive his share in the land who had set his name to the deed? Then one man, a stilt-maker by trade, coming behind, with his quag-pole struck him a deadly blow on the back of his head, and he fell with his face toward the altar.

‘ Even as he lay there, it was remembered by some of the frightened children that stood by that he raised his two hands towards the eastern window; yet neither

before he was struck, nor after he fell, did he raise a finger in self-defence, although with his country's enemies no man ever fought braver than he.

‘ So, lying prostrate on the feast of St. Elene, there, before the altar in the church of St. Stephen, was this honest man and firm patriot struck and mauled, there beaten and bruised and trampled to death.’

Thus perished a friend of the people, by them slain as a martyr, because goodness and beauty and worth cannot be known as such by those who are neither good, nor of lovely character, nor of much worth themselves, until they have first learnt that all these things are in their essence estimable and to be desired. Therefore, to be noble and of pure fame and of high enterprise in a centre where men were none of these things, was to confound them by differing

from them. Since a man can but measure any quality by the standard of his own capacity, his own ideal (even if he be a worthy soul) being but a little higher than himself, one who thus soared above all kindred judgment, whether Dutch or English, was of necessity held to be below all judgment, to be within and not without the common standard or capacity of worth.

In after years, as knowledge grew, they laid his bones beneath the altar-steps, inscribed a cross thereon, and wrote these words :

‘ In festo sanctæ Helenæ, A.D. MDCL.
Hic expiravit pro populo mortuus.’

But they stalled the horses in St. Stephen’s first ; and Dyggorie’s blood on the mare’s hoofs consecrated the desecrated aisles.

Dead, they flung his mangled body head downwards across the creature's neck. Thus they bore him back through Cutthorpe market-place, whence but now he had smilingly entered into the church, there to deposit his burden of thanks ; and so, on to Slumsby village.

Out of the burnt water-mill on Sodden Fen they had smoked three abject Dutchmen, who had there taken refuge, knowing Dyggorie to be a man of milder and juster views than his fellows. Thrust by the fierce tongues of flame into the murderous embrace of the Fen-men, these poor strangers stood awaiting their doom. The waters were rising rapidly, the sluices being destroyed; the river was swelling until it imperilled their present position ; only the Western Dyke held good. Ah well, Dyggorie was a grand worker.

That mangled head, which now lay across the mare's neck, had planned that safeguard thoughtfully, and those two dead hands, which now fell helplessly down, had delved it diligently when paid labour pricked the soil.

‘Bury the Dutchmen, quick ! Save the dyke ! Three live foreigners and one dead traitor will stop the mouth of the Western Ditch up to the Judgment Day.’

Soon done as said.

Four slight trenches are dug in the crest of the dyke, lest one too deep should submerge them all.

‘Hullo, Mistress Dailie ! we’re sending your goodman home with his friends. He’ll find a Dutch wife ere to-morrow night !’

The woman made no answer. She placed herself silently by the horse’s side, raised

the honoured head with infinite tenderness and maternal gentleness to her bosom, there laid it down. Around her neck the strong hands fell. As each tear dropped silently upon the face, she wiped off with it traces of the mud and of the wounds which had disfigured it ; and Dyggorie Dailie went to his rest with his firm calm features washed by his wife's tears. As though a woman's love could hope to atone for the injuries done by the ingratitude of men.

After all, they laid him decently enough in the trench which they had dug in the crest of the dyke, and the woman bore his head and laid it softly down, with her kerchief over the face.

When they turned to the Dutchmen, two were found to be already dead. They had drawn lots to kill each other, seeing no reason to doubt the execution of threats,

the horror of which they had too well learnt to fear. One man, and one only, remained. No merciful kinsman was there to dispatch him. Dyggorie Dailie and the two Dutchmen already lay in the rich black earth. The waters were rising rapidly. Through the broken sluice the floods were pouring ; the foot of the trembling wretch slipped ; he fell from the drove into the watergang beneath. There they left him struggling for a few minutes more or less. Could he not drown quickly enough in the merciful depths of water ? His earthy grave was ready, and they fished him out insensible.

‘Dead !’ was he ? or was he not ?

Dyggorie’s widow pressed near to see. They thrust her back. Well, the man was or was not dead when they pressed him down into the damp, dark mould, and

threw the peats in on the top of his unconscious features as the sun set on that sad May evening. It was two hundred years ago. Can the sins of the fathers live as long as that? If so, then also may their virtues.

The widow Dailie turned away into Slumsby village, there to nurse back to life the bruised and beaten lad, who had been molested whilst ploughing, at his father's commands, the newly turned-up acres of Sodden Fen. In Dyggorie's sole heir she cherished the seed bequeathed by the martyred man, to blossom again in his descendants, when Adam Daily, the thatcher's son, two centuries and more to come, trod those same peat-bogs by Diggory's Dyke, as the place ever after came to be called.

Diggory's Dyke never broke. Its waters

continued to rise and fall, according to the nature of the seasons, with an untroubled surface twelve feet broad. A mound upon its crest, long shown, marked the place where Dailie and his poor Dutch friends lay buried; and in process of time, as feeling grew, Dyggorie Dailie the murdered and maligned, became Diggorie Daily the reformer and the martyr, the lover of progress and the lover of man; and in one at least of Dailie's remote descendants a sacred fire was kindled by that vital spark extinguishable by the floods of Sodden Leam, unquenchable by the flames that devoured his only shelter in the Fen mill, for 'many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.'



CHAPTER I.

IN THE HEART OF A THATCHER.

SODDEN FEN, when Adam January Daily grew out of boyhood, consisted of no less than eight hundred acres—much of it first-class agricultural land. A large farm, occupied by Mr. Smith, parish overseer, waywarden, and churchwarden, occupied its eastern end, that lying nearest to Slumsby Church. Fields of corn waved over its western area, while on the north, where stood another water-mill in the place of Diggory's early erection, raising the waters to the height of

the dyke, the rich peat-land grew boggy till it gradually sank to the level of the reed-beds on the south. From these reed-beds thousands of bundles of osiers, yearly gathered, added largely to Mr. Smith's pecuniary profits.

The Smiths, having held this valuable farm from father to son for eighty years, hitherto had been able to afford to smile at the tradition handed down by wrong-headed country-folk touching the rights of the people to Sodden Fen as common land by virtue of Diggory Daily's gift; also at the unspoken, but not unknown, personal pretensions of James Daily, the tiler, as the direct descendant of the said Diggory.

To these lands, to all the crops gathered therein for fuel or thereon for food and fodder, did James Daily, tiler and thatcher, of Slumsby village, father of Adam January and of his eleven brothers and sisters, firmly believe that he could have made good his claim by

reason of that undoubted descent from the Slumsby martyr, had he but the means to buy lawyers and parchments, stamps and evidence; his faith in the power of wealth never having been limited by possession, and his estimate of the morality of the unknown rich in matters pecuniary having been deduced from that of the too well-known poor.

Unfortunately James Daily, the tiler, had found no friend capable of instructing him in this matter. Beyond the indisputable fact of his name and the carefully transmitted record of his descent, he could not produce one tittle of evidence whereby to support his claim upon Sodden Fen. Of more recent ancestors he had none of note. His own father and grandfather had both died in the infirmary of Cutthorpe Union; his mother was living there still. Such was felt to be the natural end of old labouring people at that time and place. Naturally,

also, of family papers he had not one scrap. So far as he knew, he was the first member of his family who had learned to read and write. Not a letter, not a book, not an old family Bible existed in the Dailys' cottage. There was absolutely not one modern prop whereon to hang the tradition handed down religiously in this humble family from unlettered father to unlettered son, that all the lands which Diggory Daily had drained had been, by virtue of his contract with Vermuyden, confirmed to him and to his heirs for a perpetual possession ; and that they, poor, struggling, little-thought-of people, were the legitimate inheritors of that much-coveted fen.

With regard to the claim of the villagers generally, based upon Diggory's dying assertion that he had made a formal renunciation in favour of his fellows, James Daily regarded it much as Churchwarden Smith viewed his, Daily's, special preten-

sions. The notion was a puerility scarcely deserving the attention of such a compassionate smile as Mr. Smith bestowed upon the mention of Daily's own name. Indeed, the roof-mender never smiled. Worn features, lean of flesh and tight of skin, hardened with exposure to sun and storm, are not given to much relaxation of facial muscles. Men such as James Daily laugh only when elated by drink, and smile never. A smile is the product of educated features, and of educated sympathies.

Those who have had the opportunity of winning for themselves friends among the labouring people, know how widely spread among them is this cherished sense of alienated possession in the land; in property generally, indeed, but in landed property more especially. The popular enthusiasm displayed by the people about the 'Claimant' was but a sudden expression of this widely spread state of feeling. His vulgar appeal

went straight to the heart of many a taciturn man and of many an over-drudged woman in remote cottages in distant villages, and in back-rooms in squalid streets, waking memories of 'claims' which they had heard their fathers and mothers speak of when they were but children : quickening the inbred passion of possession, almost stifled in them by years of hard deprivation and harder silence ; wringing from their unwonted lips the cry, born of an awakened consciousness of their own needs rather than from any actual sympathy with another's possible wrongs, ' Give the poor man his rights !'

' His rights !' Alas ! The saddest part of the whole thing being, that scarcely one soul of all those abject people has any rights whatever which would stand the light of day ; that they have merely confounded their needs with their deserts. Classes better taught make the same mistake be-

tween their deserts and their desires. That somebody else has something which would be his if he were only rich enough, or powerful enough, to enforce his claim, is the conviction which lies at the root of many a folded nature, and which would give the key to the character of many an unsuspected claimant; whilst for the envied rival, the rich man in possession, Fate, in some other form, is all the while assuming the place of another Dives, and holding the equally unattainable in an equally unyielding grasp.

This secret of the poor man is the one which he relinquishes most unwillingly, credulous ever of rivalry on the part of his equals, and of antagonistic interests and sympathies on the part of the rich. His very silence is in many instances a sad admission that he could expect nobody to believe him if he spoke. Should such a man ever show any inclination to relax the rule by which

people of another class are held to dislike his pretensions, the tenderest care will be needed not to check the tentative confidence. The least hint at the outset that his statements require verification, that his proofs will need substantiation, is sufficient to arrest the hesitating story, to thrust back the timidly proffered confidence to rankle in the jealously sensitive bosom.

Such a history was James Daily's ; and, unfortunately, such was precisely the mistake which the Rev. George Apers made when, on his presentation to the living of Slumsby, he first took up his residence in the Vicarage. The property of Mr. Smith, the churchwarden, being implicated in Daily's unwritten claims, it followed that Mr. Apers immediately heard of them ; and he made the fatal blunder of addressing Daily uninvited upon the delicate subject, without that apology which he would have felt it needful to use in drawing any well-

born skeleton from its sheltering cupboard.

Daily was fitting a lot of red pan-tiles upon the newly-restored roofs of the Vicarage pigsties, when George Apers, coming round to inspect his premises, found the tiler at his trade, and in cheerful tones addressed him thus :

‘So you’re Daily, are you, my man? Happy to make your acquaintance. I’ve heard of you from Mr. Smith. What’s all this he has been telling me about your notion of being where he is if you had your “rights”? That sort of talk won’t do, you know. Why, I might just as well tell you that I should be where the Archbishop of Canterbury himself is, if I had my deserts, instead of just having been appointed Vicar of Slumsby. You may depend upon it, Daily, we’ve none of us got any rights to anything better than what has been bestowed upon us, or

than we have been enabled to earn for ourselves.'

Had George Apers, then, quite forgotten how lately his own heart had resented such philosophy, when urging his own claims with some insistence, not indeed to the Primate's wig, but to a certain little head with a wealth of golden hair; to a face with eyes that laughed back answers, and to lips that promised in smiles a solution of the riddle of existence for some happy questioner—but not for him?

What about the college friend on whose favoured bosom he had seen for an instant Aurea Chapel's shining head reclining? What about that chosen man's superior claims? The conversion of that fugitive memory into hard fact had acquainted the young Vicar's lips with a bitterness in the draught of life, such as, class prejudice apart, might well have taught him sympathy with poor Daily in his intolerance of

Mr. Smith's rights of possession as the poison at the bottom of his vulgar pewter. But George Apers had not yet grasped the fact that a thatcher's heart could be read in a vicar's ; and, failing that appreciation, failed in all save in good intention.

‘ I've named neither my wrongs nor my rights, sir,’ said Daily moodily.

Then, tearing down with his thatcher's hook an armful of rotten thatch from the roof of a hitherto untouched building, he flung it so roughly upon the yellow head of his son Adam, who stood below waiting his father's orders, that the dust and straw flew in eddying circles round the young Vicar's smiling countenance.

‘ Take care, my man, take care ; there's no occasion to deal so roughly with the old roofs because you're putting on the new. I've been hearing all about the matter from Mr. Smith. He has his rights, you must be aware, as well as yourself ; he tells me

that he and his family have held Sodden Fen, man and boy, for eighty years : and possession, you know——’

‘No doubt, sir, no doubt,’ said Daily, making angry work with the thatcher’s hook ; ‘Mr. Smith is in his rights, and I am in my rights ; but the two rights make a wrong, and that’s all about it.’

‘Now, there I have you, Daily. Just listen to me——’

But before George Apers, carefully trained and recently fresh from college, could lay down a simple code of ethics suitable for proving to an inferior intellect that right never was wrong in this world yet, a large mass of thatch suddenly descended, this time true and full, upon his upturned countenance. Dust and cobwebs filled his surprised eyes ; weeds, moss, plants, and straw, mingling together after the fashion of antiquated thatches, stopped his breath and choked his utterance.

The Vicar was a powerful young fellow, and his spirit must have been something less, rather than more, than that of the ordinary mortal, if this affront to his manhood and his priesthood had not warmed his indignant blood. Fortunately, the shock was of the nature of a shower-bath, resulting in vigorous action for deliverance from an immediate obstacle to sight and speech ; and by the time he had freed his eyes and his mouth, it might safely be said of George Apers that the strongest feeling which still stirred his bosom was of bitter disappointment at this unusual reception of his well-intended overtures. He had meant, in showing himself acquainted with the individual history of each person in his parish, to qualify himself to act as their most intimate friend and adviser in matters of every sort.

This had been Jessie Smith's advice in the main. Jessie Apers Smith was his half-

sister, who had accompanied him on his removal to Slumsby ; and in Jessie, George believed—with reservations, of course—with reservations such as became a man and a priest, and one exceedingly conscious of both qualifications, in dealing with a woman, and one of independent thought.

George had selected James Daily—that goat among the Slumsby sheep—as a fitting subject for experiment in this mode of influence, and its ungracious reception now disheartened more than it angered him.

The roof-mender appeared more sensitive to subsequent reproof than might have been expected. He left his work unfinished, gathered up his tools, and handing them to his lad Adam, answered, ‘I took offence, sir. I am sorry if I gave it.’

So saying, he trudged off before Apers had well had time to collect his thoughts for a reply, or to scatter the straws which still clung to his clothing.

George Apers's disappointment, real enough as it was in its way, was nothing to the rankling bitterness which overflowed the soul of poor James Daily as he turned his heavy steps towards the two-roomed hovel which sheltered his ambitions and his griefs. He, too, had had his hopes about this new-comer, who had succeeded a predecessor imbecile from age. The thought had been planted as a seed in his waiting mind, that here at length he might find the help he was ever furtively seeking ; the fellow-man to whom, after close and patient observation, he might some day confide the story, or possibly even entrust the enforcement of his claims.

James Daily had never dreamt of directly accosting the new Vicar. He would merely have watched him, with a new faint hope in his heart. He would have gone to church no more than in times past, not understanding well how it could be possible to

discern the nature of any man beneath the official covering of a surplice ; but he would have noted how the new Vicar dealt with all such questions as might arise upon his own glebe, or in his own grounds, wherein the claims of the labourer and of the employer might be at variance. He would hear what kind of master he proved to his own gardeners or coachmen. He would see how the Vicar's sister approached Mrs. Daily and the other village women ; whether she came merely to teach them what she had to teach, or whether she admitted at least that there were things wherein they could instruct her. Such details are easy enough to pick up in a narrow village community ; and if, after all this slow and patient observation, the newcomers approved themselves to his, James Daily's, judgment, he thought it just possible that the day might dawn when he should confide to their judgment those pre-

tensions, the knowledge of which would give the key-note to his character ; but which his proud sensitiveness had hitherto hidden with morbid jealousy.

As he turned moodily homewards through the gathering dusk that day, James Daily did not ask himself if the clergyman would have greeted the lord of the manor by a familiar and immediate reference to his own most hidden foible, or to his pet grievance ; but he deeply felt the injury inflicted upon his self-respect, and, like the secretive and unforgiving man that he was, he watered this root of bitterness freely.

Centred in so narrow a self, it could never occur to the poor morbid man to consider the almost ludicrous disproportion between the demands he was making upon the character of another, and the response which he was prepared to render. The man was something of a pauper in spirit, but from no fault of his own ; in the world

of mind, as in that of matter, he had all to receive and nothing to give. He came of a family of paupers, whose pauperism had been not a vice, but an inevitable outcome of the conditions under which they had lived. James Daily had never held out his hard-working hand for bread, yet the lack of self-respect engendered by the enforced servitude, the underpaid labour, and the workhouse death-beds of his ancestors, had stamped its impress so indelibly on the man's nature that dignity of spirit was difficult to him. The idea that he could come under any moral obligation to render service of any kind to his fellows would have seemed a bad joke to James Daily.

It was something that he should have maintained himself above the ranks of actual pauperism. His grandfather had died, without question, in the infirmary of Cutthorpe Union; his father bitterly in the same place had grudged his bones to the

parish coffin ; but he himself would not die there at all, having full confidence in the power of his own labour to avert such a catastrophe. Neither should the parish bury him ; for at the same time that he taught himself to read, in the yard of the tilery at Cutthorpe, he had paid his first sixpence into a Burial Club. By now he had invested enough to have decently put away twenty poor men in the style in which his parents had been buried. Forty-four pounds four shillings had he paid into that club since, at sixteen years of age, disgust at the gaping boards of his father's parish coffin had entered into his soul. There would be beer, bread and ham at his, James Daily's, funeral ; all the unburied members of the club would follow him, and eight pounds at least would be spent first and last.

This was a great comfort to James Daily, more so to Susan his wife ; and was un-

doubtedly a sure sign of progress. For his son it must be reserved to take that further step upward and onward which should prove him free in spirit, if limited in action ; no abject member of a down-trodden family, but an intelligent sharer in the common life ; an heir not only of those inglorious ancestors mouldering in the parish boards, but likewise of that true nobleman whose life was given for others, in triumph, upon the altar-steps in the parish church of Cut-thorpe.



CHAPTER II.

A FIRST IDEA.

TRAILING in the dust the hook employed in tearing down the thatch from the roofs of the Vicarage outhouses, Adam Daily had silently followed his father home. It had not occurred to the lad to take much notice of the straw descending upon the Vicar's head ; it had fallen upon his own yellow locks also, and there was not that vast difference between heads that there ought to have been in Adam's estimation had he been correctly brought up. His father's

words about 'rights and wrongs' had produced a much stronger impression. It was the first time that Adam ever remembered to have heard his father speak thus. That lads of fourteen or fifteen had 'rights and wrongs,' the struggle for bed and board in the overcrowded cottage wherein he was reared had long ago taught Adam ; but that the years which emancipate a lad from control of his elders should not, as a matter of fact, bring to the man the full investiture of his 'rights,' this was a new idea for him — was not only a new idea, but, in the kingdom of thought, Adam's first idea ; for Adam had hitherto, in the sense of reflection, never thought at all, having got along very well indeed without any such mental exercise.

Adam was barely fifteen years of age ; he was the eldest of all the tribe that jostled each other in the tiler's cottage.

The head of every one of these youthful creatures was certainly provided with the due stock of brains ; but the simple machinery of life in the Dailys' cottage appealed so perpetually to the senses rather than to the intellects of its youthful inhabitants, the world that they found themselves launched into was one so exclusively made up of things indubitably adapted to their healthy animal natures whilst difficult of attainment by them, that the minds for which nothing was provided fared worse than the bodies in the struggle for subsistence.

Adam's muscles had up to this date followed the dictates of external prompting with as little consideration as though they had been those of some animated creature of a lower species. Abstract ideas had not as yet played any part in his consciousness. If you are to reflect at all, you must have not only something to reflect

upon, but also leisure wherein to ponder ; and Adam's rough brown hands, as well as those of his progenitors, had always been forced into mechanical activities before they had had time to question the nature or tendency of their employment. Much also might be laid to the score of inheritance : to keep their own bodies and souls together, afterwards to facilitate the same natural process on the part of their wives and their children, had been the only task assigned to Adam's progenitors.

All this had doubtless been not without its advantages. For generations it had delayed the production of such an abnormal being as a morbid or over-sensitive Daily ; of a Daily with a conscience drunk with the poison of doubt ; of a Daily with nerves shrinking from present bodily suffering, ready to project his fears of imaginary ill from a suggestive present to a possible future of horrible realizations. At the

same time that this state of things led to the preservation of a hard-working, it tended also to the propagation of a slow-thinking race.

James Daily himself was, as we have seen, the first exception to this rule. Until he appeared no Daily had ever been known to feel 'lonely,' or to be 'misunderstood;' but the accident which cast him at sixteen years of age into the yard of the tilery at Cutthorpe had inaugurated a fresh era for his race. There he had learnt to centre the attention vaguely wandering, after the fashion of his fathers, over things in general; and the one subject of weight in his family history naturally gave the counterpoise to the hitherto uncertain balance. From that time forth the traditional wrongs of his family in the matter of Sodden Fen lay like lead upon his heart. James Daily ate of the tree of knowledge, there in the Lincolnshire tile-yard. He

learnt to know fancied good from certain ill ; and when he returned to his native village again, it was as a changed man.

The circumstances of his return briefly concern us here, as leading up to the present history. The lord of the manor, Sir Digby Weyland, father of the present Sir Crowsby Weyland, impelled by motives of philanthropy, as inculcated by a good-natured young bride whom he had taken as his second wife late in years, determined to roof in his rotten thatch-covered cottages, with brand-new tiles of Lincolnshire clay, and James Daily was sent with others to execute the job.

The cottagers, puzzled and doubting, saw with dismay the roofs stripped over their heads. Dirt, birds'-nests, moss, weeds, eggs, and spiders, the accumulated growth of years, both vegetable and insect, dropped into their dishes, swept into their hearths, filling their wash-tubs, mingling

with their food, and crawling upon their pillows.

In vain did their landlord's amiable wife promise the health, the light, the warmth of years as the purchase of these discomforts ; the tenants discovered that the tiles were draughty, that they did not fit, that they were over-hot in summer and cold as clay in winter ; that they blew off in a capful of wind, attracted the lightning, made conduits for the rain, and stopped the children's play in the narrow strip of ground that used to be so dry beneath the eaves.

The vague grumbling that had for years been indulged in almost as a luxury over the reeking thatch, gave place to lamentations loudly uttered over the bright red tiles. Wearied with so much perversity and amazed at so much inventive faculty where he had least looked for it, Sir Digby Weyland stopped the progress of reform ;

whereon every cottager in Slumsby yet dwelling beneath a straw-covered roof took up the burden of complaint ; and it was not until long years after, when the young bride had been laid in a distant grave, that the tide of discontent thus innocently raised, sank again to its ordinary level.

Yet these very people might have blessed the memory of the beneficent lady and her well-intentioned lord had the prior lesson but been borne in mind, that to thrust an unearned boon upon a man is to lower the dignity of the giver and receiver, and to degrade the gift itself to the level of work-house bread : seeing that a boon, to be a boon, must be purchased by willing concession on the part of the receiver as well as of the giver, and that the person to be benefited must consent to part with time or labour, money or moral independence, in return for the favour conferred. But if you treat a man as you would treat a pig,

roofing in the hovel of one as you would the sty of the other, at least demand no variation in the tones of the animal's subsequent grunts. In the secrecy of his own heart, no doubt, the man will admit the advantages of lying warm and dry at nights ; but in proportion as he has preserved his own self-respect, he will dishonour drafts upon his gratitude, the drawing of which he has never sanctioned. Human benefits, in a word, must presuppose human relations.

There was one cottage which James Daily at that time unroofed, belonging to one Hoston, a drunken thatcher. All day long did this old man stand regarding the demolition of roofs which his father and grandfather before him had laid ; and when it came to the turn of his own dwelling, his wife and daughter had less reason to shudder at the draughts which searched their beds at night, beneath their temporary

covering of a tarpaulin, than at the imbecile rage and drunken fury of the husband and father.

Hoston was a dangerous man to live with at all times, and especially when displeased ; one given to venting his anger upon a patient wife and simple-hearted daughter, whose sole notion of good or evil fortune in this world might be stated in the accident of father's being drunk, more or less. On the day on which Daily put on the last ridge-tile he descended into the cottage, and rashly, as it appeared to the women, began to question Hoston as to the date of the original thatching.

Now to be curious about the past, was in itself an offence to Hoston. The family bore a bad name in the village. Local tradition was not favourable to its antecedents. A strange story was told of an ancestor who had had nefarious dealings with the walls of Diggory's Dyke ; and the man

who was foremost in instigating the building up of the Dutchmen at the time that Diggory died, was asserted in popular dictum to have been none other than the original Hoston. Like other villages, Slumsby felt the need of a scapegoat, and it chanced that the lot had fallen on Hoston.

Daily's curiosity therefore inflamed the old man's ever-ready passion ; but being a coward as well as a drunkard, the brute fell upon his daughter, who had ventured to interfere between himself and the powerful young man. To have saved a woman from another man's violence, even though that other man be her father, is to have placed yourself in temporary relations to her, suggestive of, and provocative to, more enduring affinities. So it proved in Daily's case. He had yet five years to serve in the tile-yard, but he threw up his engagement at considerable loss in order to become

the protector and husband of Susan Hoston. The sequence from this event to burying old Hoston, who died a drunkard's death in a ditch, to settling down for life in his native village of Slumsby and to becoming the father of Adam January and of his eleven brothers and sisters, is easy to trace. Just as easy is it to indicate the history of the family up to the date at which this story finds it.

The machinery of life as well as of production was simpler in those days. One man combined in his own person all the requirements of his trade. From having to do with tiles, Daily naturally came to deal with roofs. From tiles to thatch was a step facilitated by marriage with the thatcher's daughter. So it came to pass that James Daily became repairer and roof-mender in general to Slumsby and the neighbouring villages. He was a clever workman, and no jobs connected even

indirectly with his trade came amiss to him. ‘Oven-tiles,’ ‘foot-tiles,’ ‘drain-tiles,’ and ‘circulars,’ led him, by a transition equally natural, from roofs to floors, bake-houses and fields. No man in Slumsby was more constantly employed; none more steady, honest, and respectable: yet withal he was the most unpopular inhabitant of the village. Had the bad name of old Hoston fallen to his share as the daughter’s dowry? or was it simply that, having deduced from his impressions in the factory at Cutthorpe a system of conduct applicable to his daily experience, he sought no advice, took no opinions, and was a law to himself? The general feeling about him was recognised when it was stated that he was ‘deeper than Diggory’s Ditch,’ and that ‘he’d make a worse end than old Hoston yet.’

Adam January had chanced to see the light upon New Year’s Day. His father

had therefore called him Adam since he was his firstborn, and January from the day of his birth. When his second son Robert was born in February of the following year, James Daily continued the conceit ; and so on with all his children, regardless of the periods of their births. Robert February had been followed by Noah March, and so on through sweet Kitty May, down to Mary December. The neighbours laughed—one reason the more for adhering to his own particular plan, which after all had this advantage, that it gave at once the position of any child in the family, and even enabled its age to be guessed with some measure of certainty. But James Daily's character for being blamably singular was increased by this eccentricity.

In the Dailys' crowded dwelling there were but two rooms, and the biggest was but twelve feet square. This was the

lower one, which had a door, back and front, straight out into the air. Here the father and mother, three children and the baby, slept. Here the family ate and the mother worked all day. Here the cooking, such as it was, and the scanty washing, were done. Here all the children were born and reared. Above, in a garret of the same dimensions, but only eight feet at its greatest height, lay Adam and no fewer than seven of his brothers and sisters.

After her husband had died, the children then being fewer, old Mrs. Hoston had taken refuge in this garret, which she had furnished and dwelt in for years. A ladder with ten steps led up to it from beneath, and you made your entrance head-foremost through a square hole in the floor. This square had originally been closed by a trap-door ; but old Mrs. Hoston, being struck down suddenly by a fit, had died, not giving time for her removal to the room

below. Now 'the room' was universally felt by the cottagers to be the only proper place to die in, as well as to be born in. The square in the floor had of necessity been widened, and the trap-door removed, in order to admit of the passage of her coffin; Susan Daily declaring with some feeling that 'none should lay a finger on mother to lower her neck and heels, as though she'd been overcome with drink, instead of giving way to a fit which might happen to the Queen herself, and she be none the worse thought of.' So through the boards Mrs. Hoston's coffin descended, and the trap-door was never replaced.

The foot of the ladder which led to the attic was planted behind the head of Mr. and Mrs. Daily's own bed. There was a convenience in this arrangement. It enabled Mrs. Daily to call out reproofs to her children above, without raising her voice above the pitch of ordinary maternal

adjuration ; and it permitted Daily in the early mornings to summon the lads who were to turn out with him into the village, or who were to pick up stray coppers in a variety of pursuits about the fields and farmsteads.

When the late Vicar's housekeeper came to see Mrs. Hoston, 'looking as natural as sleep,' after her death in that very garret, she had expressed surprise at seeing the rain come in everywhere through the roof—one of the old thatched sort, which had suffered no change at the landlord's bidding.

'What a man ! to put new tiles on all his neighbours' dwellings, and live peaceably himself whilst the wet dripped in upon his own wife's mother, as she lay an innocent corpse ! What ! mend all his neighbour's roofs and suffer his own to let in the water ! Here was a man with a beam in his eye !'

Had the former Vicar's housekeeper been somewhat more observant of the ways of the people before she attempted to teach them her own, she would have discovered that the workman who exercises any manual craft whatever, if he be not 'a muddler' or 'an odd-jobber,' from whom nothing better is to be expected, must have arrived at a considerable degree of education before he will practise that special handicraft for any return but in hard cash. The good woman might have spared her astonishment and her remonstrances. A person of her experience might have observed that men of Daily's class will exercise their trade for everyone's benefit rather than for their own.

Further, it was characteristic of the man in question that when the good three-roomed cottage vacated by the death of his step-father, and tiled by his own hands, was offered him, at the same yearly rental, on

report by Mrs. Hoston of his increasing family to the lord of the manor's steward, James Daily refused it obstinately. Secondly, that when the same well-meaning steward wished to have repaired the roof of his present dwelling, at the landlord's expense, Daily refused to permit the man sent to touch a straw of his thatch ; although the agent was one whom he knew, and against whom he was not supposed to nourish any grudge. The neighbours after this thought, if the subject was mentioned at all, that Daily did a little botching to his own thatch at nights, on the sly ; for, curiously enough, he was reported to have been espied astride upon the roof, looking down upon his children as they slept, through the broken skylight of their attic. These panes of glass set in an old wooden frame had been let into the fabric of the roof, even with the thatch, by James Daily. The neighbours had warned him that the

drippings from the thatch would perpetually leak through the frame, that a window set in such a position never could be water-tight. Daily was not a man to turn from his own method ; and the first thing that the young Dailys had to learn, was to avoid the drops of water that fell upon them as they lay.

Large tufts of grass, freely blossoming weeds, and thick patches of moss grew over this dilapidated cottage. A splendid mass of wall-flowers flourished in the niche by the chimney. Yellow sedums peeped in at the broken panes over the children's heads ; below, honeysuckle and roses in season shaded the leaded casements of the windows. The whole was as picturesque and as unwholesome as it was possible for cottage to be.

Fortunately for the sleepers in the attic, some panes of the skylight had long ago been broken. A special catastrophe now

completed the merciful process of destruction.

At nine o'clock on the night of the day on which Daily first made acquaintance with Mr. Apers, Adam and his brother Robert both lay wakeful, for different reasons. After a period of disuse, stilts had just come again into fashion amongst the Slumsby youths; and Robert Daily, whilst his father and Adam were engaged at the Vicarage, had discovered in one of the outhouses there an old pair of drying-poles, discarded by the late Vicar's house-keeper. These he appropriated, carried them home, and concealed them in the bed; and, being a handy lad, he determined to produce them after dark, and to fabricate them as best he might into a tall pair of stilts. He had counted upon Adam's co-operation, but Adam was sleepy, or said that he was, and turned his face to the wall. The fact was, he was thinking; but how

could Robert understand that ! Robert, waiting until his parents might be supposed to be asleep below, drew forth his prize from between the framework of the wooden bedstead and the wall, to Adam's great discomfort.

In self-defence, seizing the poles, Adam reared them up on end ; when, looking up to measure their height with that of the sloping roof, he suddenly caught sight of his father's haggard countenance looking down upon them through the roof in ghostly silence.

Never had Adam seen him thus before. How should he, since he always slept as he lay down ? In confusion and much fear he thrust the long poles accidentally through the skylight, in which some unbroken glass yet remained. The results were disastrous. The defiant face was immediately withdrawn, whilst the mother, voluble enough with mistrust as wide as her experience,

sprang out of bed below, at the sound of crashing glass and shrieking children, and scrambled up the ladder.

The scene which she entered upon was startling. It was one which Adam never forgot. Memory, as a matter of fact, only carries that which thought has consciously or unconsciously imposed upon it. This was, therefore, the first of a succession of scenes by which Adam resuscitated the life of his boyhood in later years. The tiny room; the whitewashed walls scrawled all over with ill-drawn figures by the young Dailys; the old-fashioned bed in which lay, or rather crouched, Adam and Robert at the head, the two next boys at the foot, all upon bags of straw, for the very good reason that the mattress lay upon the floor for the further accommodation of four smaller children. Beside this mass of yellow-haired humanity stood an earthen pitcher, empty, on an old table which had

lost its hind legs, but which Robert had hitched into the wall. One or two lidless boxes and a chair with no back completed the picture ; but this was not poverty. The children were sufficiently fed, or nearly so ; clean-skinned and healthy. The paucity of goods was the result of mischief, and of want of space, rather than of actual lack of pieces of property.

Grandmother Hoston had furnished the garret carefully with the remains of her cottage. Mahogany chest of drawers, deal washstand, large armchair, horse-hair couch, and eight-day clock ; but all these articles had followed her coffin down through the floor, not only to give them the place of honour, but also to make way for the eight grandchildren who now slept in her place.

Four of these at present sat up upon the floor screaming with fright. The broken glass had fallen upon their faces, and

naturally clutching at the fragments in their waking terror, they had rubbed their bleeding fingers over tear-stained eyes, and now presented an appearance sufficiently alarming to the half-angry, half-frightened woman who rose in her night-things through the floor.

Adam's blue eyes meanwhile wandered from all this confusion to the space above their heads, where his father's face had looked ghastly in the light of the half-risen moon, as he gazed down upon them in silence, all the more impressive by contrast with the noise and clamour which had been awakened beneath. The still face vanished, however, long before the mother had administered comfort and reproofs to her children ; and when, seizing the drying-poles, she went to the top of the ladder, and calling down into the darkness, 'Look out, father ! Mind the baby,' threw them clattering down upon the bricks below,

James Daily answered by a dry assent which seemed to come from the bed.

After Mrs. Daily had joined her husband a conversation took place, which, falling upon Adam's awakened intelligence, proved his final introduction to the birth-pangs of conscious thought. The sentences were few, and of trivial import apparently, but Adam's mind took their impress as though cut in marble, and retained them until the day of his death.

His father spoke first, an unusual circumstance ; for, like most men of his class, he left words for women, contenting himself with power.

‘ There'd be more peace out in the open, listening to the wind in the rushes on the Fen, than in the brangling o' your boys and girls. There isn't a quiet one in the lot. They're always ragging and raffling.’

‘ There isn't a crooked one in the lot,’ rejoined Mrs. Daily ; ‘ and plenty would be

glad to make 'em all good, from January down to December, and not one that can't take a beating when he's earned it. How'll we call the next one, father? Will it do to begin on the days of the week, and say "Sunday"? Granny, she believed the new Vicar'd take it for a compliment, and it'd make 'em feel at home at the Vicarage.'

'Granny' was James Daily's sole surviving parent, who was still a well-known inmate of Cutthorpe Union. Then, more in remonstrance than in anger, James Daily spoke :

'The fact's this, mother. The next child that comes into this place, one goes out of it ; and so on now, if it was to follow my burial !'

Adam listened ; not now with his ears only ; but with all his senses stretched to the utmost.

Mrs Daily made no immediate reply. Woman-like, she waited opportunity ; only

she snuffled, as Adam knew she always did when most she felt like crying.

‘The fact is,’ she presently said, with a voice pitched in a plaintive key, ‘those four eldest ought never to’ve been born, and wouldn’t, only for poor father being what he was.’

By which enigmatical speech Mrs. Daily simply alluded to the fact of Daily’s having had to make her a home five years before his time in the tile-yard was out, owing to her father’s drunken violence ; but to Adam, ignorant of all this, and lying just above in the darkness, the strange words seemed full of terrible and mysterious meaning. So he, Robert February, Noah March, and even pretty Mary Anne April, were somehow to blame for their share of existence.

The poor lad had already heard several new things that day. His father’s words with the Vicar had rooted themselves in his memory ; and now there was his father, just

as the neighbours whispered, bestriding the roof when all the village was abed—what could it be for? Not to mend it, evidently, Adam knew better than that; not to play the guardian-angel over his children's slumbers, a thing which was even less likely; but here Adam's certainties stopped. The words which had reached his anxious ears from below had served only to divert, not to enlighten his perplexities; no betrayal even of her necessary knowledge of her husband's eccentricities had been made by any expression of surprise on Susan Daily's part, and Adam was left unaided in the struggle with his own cogitations. Formless and void were the ill-defined shapes peopling his imagination; but new light was dawning in the chambers of his brain, although as yet it only served to show him dim shapes and weird, moving in a dread phantasmagoria of their own, defying his attempts at once to grasp them

or dismiss. Big sighs heaved his honest chest. He did not rightly understand the weight that lay there. He screwed his rough fists into his round, wide-open eyes ; then suddenly nudging his brother, sought in companionship the solution of sorrow.

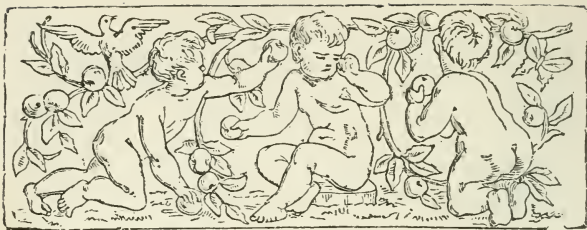
‘ I say, Bob—I feels bad, I do. I’ve got a lump in my throat, and I can’t work it up nor down.’

‘ Hold your noise,’ said Robert crossly. He was sleepy, and justly vexed at the loss of his stilts. Then Adam held his tongue, and began to ponder over what this new sensation meant, learning for the first time, in silence, that one of twelve brothers and sisters, and that one a Daily, could feel very queer and lonely, even when sleeping four in a bed, with as many more on the boards.

In the progress of his race the onward step which Adam took that night was a stride of great importance. His father, James Daily, was intellectually more ad-

vanced than his wife, in that he was able to sum up his opinions, whilst she expressed hers only by action ; but the further stage of development by which a man inquires into the secrets which he finds in his own mind, reasons about the views which he has formulated, holds a dialogue with himself, and discusses the matter in his own double consciousness, James Daily had not reached and never might reach. That stage was reserved for his son.

Henceforward Adam Daily began to consider not only what he thought, which was more than his mother and as much as his father had done ; but further, why he thought it, which was more than any Daily had yet attained to. Mrs. Daily didn't think ; she only acted. James Daily both thought and acted. Adam Daily at fifteen years of age began to reason about what he thought, and why he acted ; with resultant consequences that shall be told.



CHAPTER III.

THE VICAR'S SISTER.

THE new Vicar of Slumsby was the possessor of that fair hair, those clearly-cut features, and those long limbs so greatly admired in curates. His appearance was so very much the right thing that it might have stood in his way with prudent many-daughtered rectors, but for the counterbalancing qualification that he was heir to a large estate in Devonshire and to a considerable fortune.

Slumsby was a college living, and until it fell to his share, George Apers had been

the most popular curate in a neighbouring town. His half-sister Jessie, too, who kept house for him, also had her admirers, though they were of a different type from her brother's.

Jessie Apers-Smith was a young-looking woman of about eight-and-twenty. It was understood that she had early been parted from her husband, and had lost her infant child. Rumour said that he had been a man who was below her in station, and who was moreover given to drinking; in any case, she was one of those women, virtually widowed, in whose lives there is felt to have been a mysterious something, to which only those near enough to keep silence have learnt to give a name. But in spite of her sorrows, and all the more for her sorrows, her friends were accustomed to say of her, that they found her so 'supporting.' This epithet, savouring though it did of material consolation, was yet no misap-

plication in fact, though it might be in expression.

Mrs. Smith was admirably adapted to supplement her brother's somewhat unfinished characteristics. The things of which he was most ignorant were precisely those with which she was most conversant. Whilst he had been studying classics, she had been studying modern humanity. Whilst he had been devoted, masculinewise, to the consideration of his own interests, intellectual and pecuniary, at college—cogitations harmless enough, but still self-centred—she had been tasting the full flavour of life, having grounded her hopes in the fate of another.

George Apers was very loyal to his sister Jessie ; admired her with brotherly partiality, and had long kept the thought of making her a home very near his otherwise preoccupied heart. When outspoken people ventured to hint to him that such

fraternal devotion would be likely to hinder the inevitable selection of a wife, he was accustomed to make answer that he had rather be upheld by Jessie's presence than weighted with the necessities of a feeble kind of woman. But Jessie was too far-sighted and too wise ever to submit her influence to this crucial test. The moment that she saw her brother successfully endeavouring to attract, instead of placidly submitting to attraction, she had long ago determined to precipitate matters by every means in her power. And her power was great—all the greater for the absence of obvious manifestations. She could not endure that the failure of her own life should involve the development of her brother's in its consequences.

For the last three years she had only been waiting, ever on the wing, ready to take flight. The home that she called hers, was hers in no sense other than the lodging

where she passed a few calm days and nights, in the vortex between two seas. The great waves which had left her there would bear her off again upon their crests before long, as she clearly foresaw, parting her from the brother at whose gentle side she had found a temporary resting-place only.

She had no doubt of her own perspicacity in noting the precise moment at which to relinquish her home and to precipitate 'that other' into it. Meanwhile, having met, only in vain, with 'that other,' George Apers was sceptical of her re-appearance under any new form. Every man is so, up to a certain moment, in itself no different from scores of others to uninitiated eyes. He reaches that moment, and all is changed. But it is rare indeed that a man chooses a wife with the applause—nay, even with consent of his neighbours' understanding, should his choice appeal

not to their perception of material advantage, but to their estimate of intrinsic worth.

‘She will not be a bit better than all the rest, only you will fancy her so, George,’ Jessie had once said.

‘You are different, so why not she?’

‘That has nothing to do with the question. Whatever I am, it is very certain the coming woman will in no particular resemble me.’

And George was sufficiently impressed with the force of his sister’s conviction not to attempt to contradict her.

Although the subject had never been mentioned between them, with a reticence not uncommon in families, Jessie was well aware of that golden-haired epoch connected with the name of Aurea Chapel; but looking at its heroine with the dispassionate eyes of a vexed sister whose brother has been rejected for another, she held

Sunny-hair to be altogether unworthy of her brother George. Common-sense therefore led her to turn his thoughts perpetually into the direction of there being yet another maiden somewhere, destined for him. Ignoring Golden-hair completely, she endeavoured to accustom his thoughts to the acceptance of the fact that he was to marry, and that soon ; and that the girl who was to come was the one woman in the world for him.

‘If I could only succeed in persuading him,’ she thought, ‘that the past was more than half fancy, how much would be gained!’

Jessie was not disingenuous in this. Even her clear-sightedness for once was at fault. Disliking the girl, she had been tempted into the mistake of disbelieving the depth of his feeling ; since women, whilst they can understand any amount of enthusiastic devotion to a woman whom they themselves

admire, are singularly difficult of belief in the devotion of a man to the woman whom they themselves hold cheaply, or with whom they have no sympathetic affinities.

No outsider of any uprightness of judgment or clearness of insight could spend five minutes in Jessie Smith's company without coming to the surest conviction that, whatever the mystery of her life, Jessie's share in it at least must have been that of a woman above and not below the higher standards of moral rectitude. No discerning mind could long be under her influence without realizing that the waves which had wrecked her so early in her course, far from submerging, had but lifted her higher.

In her case, however, as in that of others, these were only the wider-eyed judges. There were plenty of people around of narrow experience, the prejudiced or the

selfish, to whom Mrs. Apers-Smith was simply 'that odd woman who had a story.' 'A story' to such excellent people, who get on so admirably without one, seems to be pretty much the same thing as spectacles to a man who can do without them.

Further, these capable critics felt deeply convinced that 'it'—whatever form of ill-luck the 'it' might be taken to stand for—'it' must have been all Jessie's own fault. Were this to be taken otherwise, their own special freedom from the incubus of a neuter pronoun could scarcely be held to be meritorious; an inference not to be risked.

Then, too, Mrs. Smith was accused of 'saying things,' of 'talking to make herself remarkable,' of 'speaking for effect;' and these self-elected censors deeply pitied her brother, whose kindness they held to be strikingly manifested by his keeping 'such a person' in his house, although his own

chances of marriage were certain to be injuriously affected by the arrangement. The perfectly complacent mothers of thoroughly eligible daughters were the persons most apt to be struck by this view of the case.

It is unfortunately the case that a free growth in worldly prosperity can seldom be relied upon to produce an equally progressive development of moral judgment. The luxurious spread of the vegetation upon the sunny side of the wall is apt to be a trifle rank. Eyes which have long been limited to a narrow view, thrown up in strong relief, mistake vaster objects dimly discerned beyond their accustomed range of vision. Nor is there any individual more strongly objected to by the woman who doesn't talk, than the woman who does; the non-talker usually adopting the peculiar position that the fewer ideas she expresses the more she has;

which might be true if thoughts were coppers to squander or to hoard.

On all these grounds Jessie was not that questionably genuine article, 'the universally popular woman;' but upon the affections of a large body of her brother's friends, both male and female, she had a hold as strong as was her interest in them. Of these were women with sympathies too wide for petty jealousies; and men with hearts too free from personal vanity to take fright at a woman's generously expressed regard. If only Jessie could have buried her past, she might have been again a happy woman; but, alas for that immutability of the gone-by which is still the saddest thing of the present! Numberless rivers may mock us with the promise of oblivion; in none of their waters is there any virtue. For all there is at last but one river, one Lethe, one flood, for healing and forgetting; one stream—that of Death.

Probably no two persons would have answered alike, nor would any one have answered similarly on two different days, any question about Mrs. Smith's personal appearance.

She had not her half-brother's fair head of hair, the perfectly indicated outline of his features, the expression of his mouth almost too refined for literal translation of any but the best-assorted notions, the modulations of his equal voice. Whilst no one would have hesitated to own that George Apers was very good-looking, and most would have added that he was as good as he looked—thereby placing him in the same category with a peach—about Jessie's appearance, manners, and disposition, opinion had never been unanimous. It was all a matter of taste, or rather of opportunity.

On dull days, when she was out of harmony with her surroundings, Jessie Smith

looked as commonplace as her name. A sad heavy look clouded her eyes, her colour became opaque, her voice lost its ring, her features their play; but if in the midst of all this a friend came in whose voice told her of hidden affinities, she changed as a landscape changes—becoming no longer a plain-faced woman, but a girl flushed with excited feeling, eager with life. Her very hair seemed to put on brilliancy of tone, to change from a dullish brown to burnished auburn. Her height seemed to increase. She was rather a tall woman, but she had an acquired habit of stooping when alone with thoughts that were sad, or with people that were alien to her, as though borne down by an oppressive burden. Possibly the brother with whom she lived was the only person capable of really saying whether Jessie was a plain or a handsome woman; and he always declared that she ‘could be just which she chose’—

that when she was ugly it was her own fault. Whereupon she would retort that she would rather vary like the weather than be always serenely nice-looking, as he was.

‘The first time that I see you ugly, George, I shall congratulate you ; for I shall know that you are then a richer if an unhappier man,’ she had answered.

This was the lady at whom Mr. Smith looked askance when, a few mornings after the arrival of the new-comers, he called in to pay his respects at the Vicarage. He found the brother and sister in the garden. George was smoking, Jessie was carelessly plucking flowers. The Vicarage garden was well stocked and old fashioned, and the farmer joined them in strolling up and down the narrow paths.

Mr. Smith was in no sense the typical churchwarden. A humble deprecatory air, rather than the confidence of office, dis-

tinguished the tall spare man ; who, with his pronounced stoop, his thin white hair, and his feeble gait, hung upon Mrs. Smith's words as she initiated their somewhat desultory conversation. Seeing woman-kind from the point of view of the elderly widower, whose solitary path has led him through a long line of housekeepers, he seemed surprised at Jessie's taking the lead in the dialogue. He decided at once that the Vicar's sister must be very handsome, although he was not otherwise conscious of the fact, since on no other hypothesis could he explain female prominence in a conversation. A woman who could conquer and could maintain a position for herself in virtue of her wits, lay outside the range of Mr. Smith's very narrow experience. His attention was so very much attracted by her that he began to wonder how it would be if he were to admit this unknown kind of woman within the arena of his personal

thoughts and feelings—a narrow circle enough. What would her dictum be, upon certain perplexities which had much beset him of late? He allowed himself, as a simple exercise of curiosity, and as a relief from pressing solitude of thought, just to state his case mentally, whilst perpetually glancing at her sideways from under the old-fashioned brim of the tall hat, which marked his respect for the Vicarage.

Suppose he were consulting her about his runaway son, the only child he had ever possessed. Suppose he were some day to tell her the story. Many a time had he sighed at the apparent impossibility of getting one human being to lay a finger upon the least and lightest corner of the burden he was carrying so wearily still, as the years spun round. Suppose he were to tell to this woman, who struck him at first sight as no woman had ever struck him before, how night after night in his

dreams, waking or sleeping, his son's face came before him—bitterly, as he had seen it last—flushed with drink, mad with passion, his gun loaded, his finger on the trigger, aiming at his father's head.

Would she say he was right in that he had turned the young fellow then and there from his door, never to set foot upon Sodden Fen again, although it would now be twenty years ago in little more than a week? What would she say of the ill-judged bringing-up? What of the angry ejection? What of the unguarded entry into life? What of the homeless manhood? What of the fatherless thrust into an unfriendly world?

There was another side to these questions. What of the childless home on the fen, tenanted by a lonely old man with an only half-satisfied conscience? It was bad to be a churchwarden for ten years, and only to have half a good conscience.

‘ Holding the plate brought it home to you so.’ Mr. Smith had often been tempted to envy the dead and gone Vicar the senility which dulled the pangs of memory and regret, whilst it left the edge of daily appetite no blunter than of yore. Now he couldn’t care for his housekeeper’s providings, though the mutton was pastured on Sodden Fen, and the pike trolled in Diggory’s Dyke. He was saving all his money, too, and the time was coming for making a will. There was a sheet of paper in his desk at home which, unwritten, spoke volumes to him. Now, making a will when you’ve got no children, as an occupation is not to be distinguished from tracing out your tombstone. For satisfaction there is little or nothing to choose between the two employments.

Jessie, therefore, catching Mr. Smith’s furtive glances of inquiry, once or twice wondered what he was thinking about.

Had he been a poor man of Daily's class, she would have made him feel at home with her quickly enough ; but even intelligent and 'supporting' women are apt to overlook the claims of the poor rich in preference for the more striking but often less urgent needs of the richer poor, and Jessie Smith had no suspicion of her companion's moral destitution.

To have all, and yet not to abound, was Mr. Smith's dark experience. His nearest neighbours, the Dailys, had nothing ; and yet from his different point of view, they possessed almost everything : health, strength, children's laughter, busy days, and sleepful nights ; regulated labour, sufficiency of substance : no responsibility, no penury, no care except such as came, he judged, of their own making, when the disproportion between their claims and their capacities forced sorrow on them. And yet there was no will to be made in

the Dailys' cottage. No will, but there were seven sons and five daughters.

There was no son in Sodden Farm, there had never been a daughter ; but there were eight hundred acres of Sodden Fen, growing yearly more profitable. There was money in Cutthorpe Bank. There were buildings, and lands, and possessions, and in the midst of all a poor shivering soul, starved with solitude, crippled with timidity, trembling with remorse for the past ; an upright, well-meaning, tired-out man, who would have given James Daily the coveted eight hundred acres to-morrow, for one true grasp of his own son's hand—for one healing hour in his son's repentant company, if only during that long last hour his son might wait upon him as he had but now seen Daily's yellow-haired lump of a boy obeying with dog-like fidelity the instructions of his ill-conditioned father—for so Mr. Smith considered James Daily.

‘Slumsby is proud, madam, to welcome a lady to the Vicarage at last,’ said Mr. Smith, with his old-fashioned notions of politeness. ‘The late Vicar, like myself, was unfortunately a widower, and obliged to depend upon his housekeeper. My best wishes for your brother are that he may never require one.’

George answered, laughing :

‘Why, Mr. Smith, you are as bad as my sister. She persists in wishing to see me a careworn man with a sickly wife and twelve ill-brought-up children, for all the world like the fellow who is tiling the piggeries.’

‘Yes, I do, Mr. Smith, in order that his capacities for affection may be thirteen times multiplied, in order that he may have thirteen times the experience, and may be thirteen times as wise and as useful to his fellow-creatures,’ said Jessie, smiling.

‘In order that self-regard may be thirteen

times multiplied by family affection, in order that sneaking self-love may be developed into unabashed selfishness, claiming to be legitimized by extension to wife and family,' said George.

'The lack of time and money might be more than compensated by the increase of sympathy,' she answered; 'how can such a young man be qualified to deal with misery and vice who has had no troubles except such as he has more than half-invented for himself in order to enjoy the luxury of contrast, whose notions of poverty are theoretic, and who is as ignorant as every man must be to whom law has been a beneficent friend through life, of the burning force of temptation to set it aside, known to those only upon whom the yoke has been laid, as they cannot but feel, to their infinite misery, and to the equal advantage of others?'

Mr. Smith stared, and George gave her

a questioning look ; but Jessie was too full of her subject to be restrained by either manifestation.

‘Have your teeth ever bitten into the flint stones? have your eyes ever looked upon death—have you even seen it, George? No, I believe not; why, Buddha’s black grain of mustard-seed might almost be found in your house.’

‘What kind of grain was that?’ Mr. Smith asked.

Pedigree wheat, oats, and potatoes for seed were well within his cognisance ; but even if this outspoken lady were prepared to assert that her knowledge of samples exceeded his own, he did not feel disposed to dispute her authority. The Vicar smoked on complacently.

‘What can you expect,’ she continued, ‘when such a man, dear and estimable as you may be, is set down to be guide, adviser, friend to a mass of struggling, want-driven,

hunger and sin-compelled people, to decipher their ill-expressed griefs, to surprise their hidden failures, to remedy their vices, to resolve doubts which in them are oftenest the result of having for generations been offered, or even forced to accept, their religion dressed in a garb selected by classes other than their own ?'

'I cannot see, O enthusiastic preacher, how I am to feel the grip of the law except by breaking it : would you have me shoot Mr. Smith, that I may know what it is like to run the risk of hanging ?'

Jessie changed colour, and Mr. Smith started. The illustration was particularly unfortunate, although George Apers did not know it. Mr. Smith cast a glance of entreaty at the lady, the meaning of which was apparent although the motive was not. It said : 'Continue the conversation, and cover my silence.'

'You are jesting, George ; and I am so

serious. You have always accepted the laws of the present social order, no doubt. Most persons do so accept them, until they press upon themselves. Then I am much mistaken if every thinking soul amongst us does not for the first time immediately question them ; only after long struggle, perhaps, to acquiesce in the obvious fact that the realization of pressure is the announcement of need.'

'All this is elementary, Jessie. Your feeling inspires you, but you are simply animating the oldest truths with new fervour.'

'Wait till you feel the oldest truths, then. The things that you have felt will always seem to you new. It does not matter how ancient the forms are, if only the life be fresh. What would it matter to us if any of our children inherited the precise features of their ancestors ?'

'Mr. Smith, you have sons, I believe ?

Would it matter to you if anyone came to you and told you as a fact that such and such a boy of yours was merely the reproduction of his great-grandfather who died a hundred years ago? It is the same with the children of our thought.'

Mr. Smith shrank into himself, buttoned his loose overcoat as if it were March instead of June, and nervously stammered :

'No doubt, madam—no doubt; but I am not in a position to judge. I am, in fact, a childless widower.'

'Which gives us one more link in common, sir,' she said, evidently touched, and laying for an instant a hand upon the old man's arm.

'The fact is, my dear Jessie,' said George, after a sudden pause, which neither of the others seemed ready to break, 'that you have a trick of speaking in that vehement and frequently mistaken way of yours, as though not even by twos and threes, but absolutely

as units, each individual man stepped forth, into a land where no footprints showed the way, and where every fresh person had to trace out for himself a fresh path in a new world.'

'My wishes for you are,' she replied, 'that you should not rest content with following others, but that your life should be such as to develop as fully as possible all the sides of your nature; that you should not rest contented with being a scholar and a gentleman, and a kind-hearted, excellently meaning fellow, but a man fired with divine enthusiasm for the progress of his race, ardent in sympathetic feeling, conversant with the mysteries of life, not shrinking from the darker sides of death. Then that pleasant face of yours will be less fair in outline, but more beautiful in fact, my brother.'

George threw away the end of his cigar, and taking his seat upon the garden-

wall, looked smilingly down upon his sister.

‘How many men, my dear Jessie, would be angry with your rash eagerness ! how many more would waste good argument upon you ! I do neither ; I simply admire your pleasant enthusiasm, and note how well it becomes you. It makes you what you once were at twenty years of age.’

An expression of pain crossed Jessie’s features. The light which her brother complimented her upon, his admiration effectually quenched.

‘How long will men, even the best of brothers, continue to silence women by personal reference, George ? And how often am I to entreat you not to touch upon the past ? It is all very well for you lightly to refer to your five-and-twenty years ; but my past does not belong to myself.’

In an instant the kind-hearted man was

beside her ; and to save his feelings, Jessie stifled further expression of her own. This woman, who had just been wishing such troublesome experiences for him, would not momentarily wound him by allowing him to see that he had wounded her.

An interruption at this moment was not inopportune. As Mr. Smith was taking his leave, a voice behind them said :

‘ If you please, here’s the last old lady’s drying-poles. Mother sent ’em to you. She says our Bob took ’em, which he might have known better !’

Jessie turned and saw behind her a lad whose hair was as fair as her brother’s, but tanned by wind and weather ; whose eyes were as blue, but instead of shining forth certainties, showed only dim wonder ; whose whole sturdy frame, rough hands and breadth of face, spoke him just what he was, an honest, hard-working, and slow-thinking lad.

‘Come forward here, my boy, and tell us what you want.’ George Apers spoke, leaning back comfortably upon the garden-wall, and smiling at his sister. ‘Now, Jessie, practise some of your theories—quick! Why, this is the lad who was working with his father at the pigsties, yesterday! What’s all this about now, my man?’

Adam then related in slow and confused speech how his brother Bob, coming to bring their father’s dinner, had seen and appropriated the old poles, and how his mother had sent them back. Of all that had happened in consequence, he said nothing, though he was thinking much.

Now to be called upon to practise what you have just been preaching, for the edification of your hearers, is to to be placed in evidence sufficiently embarrassing, and Jessie felt it; she therefore beckoned the lad to follow her to the old washhouse whence the poles had been taken.

‘What did your Bob want them for?’ she asked.

‘For making stilts.’

‘Don’t they make stilts down in your village?’

‘Aye, grand ones, at Master Sadd’s.’

‘Then would your Bob like a pair?’

Adam’s eyes grew rounder still with wonder.

‘Aye,’ he repeated, with a world of astonished gratitude in the tone.

‘Come with me, then, and show me where Mr. Sadd lives; don’t you want some too?’

The boy was silent.

Thinking he had not understood her, Jessie repeated the question.

Adam seemed puzzled for an answer.

‘Not now,’ he stammered.

‘Not now! Why not now? Can’t you tell me, or would you rather not?’

What Adam longed to utter was his

trouble : in the first place that he 'ought never to have been born ;' in the second, that he was to go away to make room for the thirteenth comer. The big 'lump' coming back into his throat, he was so choked he could not speak. Even had he dared to utter his feelings, he did not know how to express them. He referred all his grief to physical causes. Modern research perpetually tightens the links which connect physical and mental phenomena. Adam had arrived at similar conclusions as a child learns how to walk, without any reasoning at all. For him it was an untaught axiom of elementary experience. Many a good dog knows more than his master could with safety be called upon to prove.

When, therefore, Adam spoke, it was to blurt out words which astonished his hearer.

'I'd liefer have sumthen to eat : I'm hungry.'

He was not hungry in the least. He had had a larger dinner than common. The hunger was of his heart for sympathy ; but that he did not know.

‘ You want something to eat ! Well, I will give you that too, gladly, if you want it ; but you look like a well-fed boy enough.’

She stopped at the baker’s, and gave him two rolls.

Adam ate every mouthful, for he could always eat all the food that came in his way.

‘ Now, if you feel better,’ said Mrs. Smith, in a friendly tone, ‘ tell me what is your work ? What are you going to be ?’

‘ I don’t care for nothing, if I can’t be a gardener,’ the lad answered, this time rapidly enough. ‘ This is where we live. I trained every one of those roses myself. There’s sorts you haven’t got up at your place. I can graft ’em, too, so as you wouldn’t know

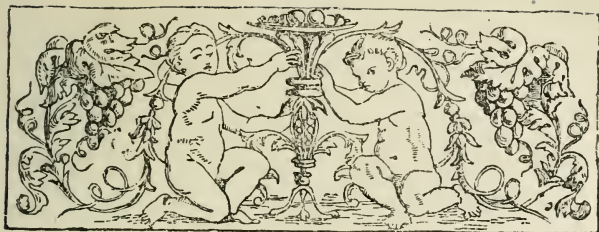
I wasn't taking eighteen shillings a week—mother says so, and so does Sir Crowsby's man. He learned me how; his joints kind of stiffened, and his feel for the flowers went out of his fingers.'

'Was that how you learnt gardening, Adam?'

'Mostly; I'm often down at the Ferry, "Dripping Ferry"—that's what they call the old Manor House where Sir Crowsby Weyland lives. He ain't there much, only in summers; but the gardener is expecting of him 'fore long, and he've had me down there, helping him to tidy up a bit. He gets the rheumatics awful; and when the young gentlemen comes down—there's five on 'em, you know—along with their mother, as is Sir Crowsby's sister, and a widow lady, they do play the poor old chap such dreadful tricks. They'd call 'em a bad lot, if they was one of us. I'd give a beating to any one o' my little brothers as I caught

raffling about 'long o' them. Bob and me—we're forced to stand 'em, 'cos we meets 'em in the way o' business ; but we don't take no notice o' their wickedness—no more does their mother, nor their uncle. They flogs 'em at school, so I've heard tell. Father 'ud turn round pretty quick if anyone was to lay a finger on us at school or anywheres else ; but then we've been better brought up, as mother she often says. There's mother, leaning against the door. That's our baby !

Thus introduced, Jessie stepped up to the cottage, and Susan Daily stood before her.



CHAPTER IV.

SUSAN DAILY'S VIEWS.

‘**Y**OU’RE the first person I’ve called upon in the village, Mrs. Daily,’ said Jessie, stepping under the shelter of the cottage porch.

Susan Daily, who, by reason of her husband’s well-known independence of character, was used to being always the last, answered what she took to be the only conceivable object of the visit.

‘Do you want to make a picture of the house?’

The cottage was indeed a tempting object for a sketch, with its low roof heavily thatched to a foot deep, the thatch grown over with flowers, the broad eaves and the narrow casements, the porch upheld by rustic poles supporting two benches—real oak benches, not common deal such as might be found in the Manor House kitchen. There were red-tiled edges to the garden borders too ; and the beds themselves were filled with flowers, than which the Vicarage garden could show none finer, any more than it could vie with the luxuriant roses and creeping-plants that grew right up into the windows, and over the roof, and peeped in at the broken skylight of Adam and his brothers' garret. But, oh ! the ditch that stagnated right in front of the cottage, like a moat defending a castle wall, with only a stone across it by way of a bridge. Visitors to Slumsby were always eloquent on the subject of that par-

ticular ditch. It was a fatal drawback to amateur artists, who annoyed Mr. Daily by desiring to transfer his cottage to their drawing-boards ; but Jessie was not one of these.

‘ No, I do not care to paint the cottage,’ she replied ; ‘ I would rather make a picture of your baby. What’s her name ? Mary December !’

Then followed the story of the names, lengthened by Susan Daily’s deprecatory comments upon the neighbours’ criticisms ; such as :

‘ Let everybody say what they liked, they would be proud enough of her boys if they had them ; there were plenty that couldn’t get through the days of the week, let alone the months of the year, and not one missing.’

‘ Ah ! Mrs. Daily, I never had but one, and that one is “ missing,” ’ answered the Vicar’s sister, with tears in her voice.

Susan Daily felt it manners to make no comment upon what must, she felt sure, have been a lady's bad management ; but she gave up her clean, bright baby into the stranger's arms.

‘ Now that's the case with Master Smith,’ she said presently. ‘ He never had but one, and that one's been missing these twenty years. My mother used to tell the tale. She was helper there once.’

‘ That is a tale I want to hear. Will you tell it me ? I have a good reason for asking it. I am not a gossip, and I am sure you cannot be one either, with twelve children all kept so clean and well cared for.’

Susan Daily hastened to explain, in local dialect, that she ‘ never went out rucking,’ *i.e.* gossiping ; then she told her visitor the unhappy story of poor Mr. Smith's runaway son.

Before it was ended, her visitor, turn-

ing her back to the sunlight, had seated herself in the shade of the open doorway. When it was done, she asked abruptly :

‘Do you ever work for Mr. Smith now, as your mother did before you ?’

‘Daily’d see me streaked first, before I did service on Sodden Fen, you may depend upon that!’ was the ready answer. Then wife-like, forestalling accusation of an unpopular husband by defiant excuses, she irrelevantly continued : ‘But there’s not another husband in Slumsby or out of it, high or low, rich or poor, that gets out of his bed in all weathers, wet or fine, cold or hot, to wash and dress a lot of little children, and give ’em their breakfasts that his wife may lie in bed one day in seven. When any of your masters does that, come and let me know, is what I says, and I’ll own that you’ve got a husband even to mine, and no sooner.’

‘Mrs. Daily,’ said Jessie, ‘your husband must be a very good man.’

Susan Daily stopped, and gasped with surprise. For the first time in sixteen years she found her defence of her husband uncalled for by the recognised voice of authority in Slumsby. It was ever ‘Daily the character ;’ ‘Daily the defiant ;’ ‘Daily with his wrongs ;’ ‘Daily with his levelling opinions ;’ ‘Daily with his independence ;’ ‘Daily who would, if he could, be as dangerous as he was disagreeable.’ Surprise and gratification nearly choked the simple wife. All Daily’s virtues hitherto had looked far too much like vices, when viewed as the old Vicar’s curates and his housekeeper used to view them, through the windows of the church which he never entered ; and his wife whilst defending him, woman-like, held him more than half guilty, and pitied herself confusedly for the bend that her lot necessarily took to his ‘ways.’

Doubt of her visitor's judgment, however, mingled with certainty of her good manners, in Susan Daily's mind, as she answered :

‘ Yes, he is as good as I could look for, ma'am ; but I'm free to wish you a better. Though I don't know who you are, nor I don't know where you come from, yet I know this, that you speak like a sister to me !’

‘ If I might have as good a one, Mrs. Daily, I should be a richer woman than I am now, and a happier.’

When others depreciated her husband, Susan Daily felt it to be only her duty to set him up upon a pinnacle ; but when quite unexpectedly he elsewhere found an advocate, she was sensible that it was only manners to take him down a bit. This recognition of his merits was all the more startling to her, owing to the quarter from whence it came. As an emissary from the

Vicarage the old housekeeper used, indeed, to look in from time to time, but it was always to remonstrate about this very habit of 'using the sacred day of rest to act the sluggard ;' and the word 'sluggard,' as applied to her incessantly active self, Susan Daily could not put up with. Agitated, but unconvinced, she had invoked her husband.

'Do it strike you as true, that what she said ?' he had asked. 'Do you think she can feel in her bones better than you, whether it will do you most good to be lying in yer bed one morning in the week, with the baby tucked up in yer arms, and all the little uns nicely got up and sent out to school or to play, or to be crouched down on the free stones, envying the church company their fine carpets and cushions, with the baby wailing at home (for they won't let you hush it up in the church except when it goes to be christened ; ye'll

have to turn to the chapel for that), and the t'others tumbling each other head-foremost down the ladder ?

‘ You’d be there to speak sense to ’em.’

‘ Not I, mother. I work ’em up on Sundays that you may lie abed. If you stir you may do your own work, and I’ll lie my length ; I don’t meddle in it to pleasure myself, nor yet to please those that are thinking themselves my betters. I get up to do my duty by you, as I promised.’

After which Susan Daily gave up all attempt at further ventilation of the matter, for she was an ingenuous creature, too much occupied with her family to be more than momentarily exercised by the discrepancies which existed between what her husband held to be right, and what the village authorities inculcated. She had a habit of speedily relinquishing all attempt at mental solution of any such question, in favour of

a practical conclusion based upon solid grounds of affection and expediency.

‘Daily was a good husband and a good father, and he had a right to be master if he chose.’ The Susan Dailys who convert unmanageable dilemmas into very simple deeds, show results none the less logically proven because they would be utterly incapable of demonstrating the process by which they have arrived at their conclusions.

Except in action, Susan Daily was inarticulate; there, she was eloquent enough. She washed her children’s faces, and was not unmindful of their manners. No mean tricks were permitted in her cottage. No nasty words might soil her children’s lips. Perhaps she did not go the most direct way to work ; she was often inconsistent in action, and inconsequent in speech ; yet she brought up a large family, with pink cheeks and clean hair, all strong and all

healthy ; fairly clothed, completely washed, sufficiently fed, not entirely untrained or unguided ; more likely in the road to good than in the way to evil.

If by our actions we must stand or fall, what more would you have of a village wife ?

Jessie did not try to instruct her. She did not attempt to moralize. She wanted to understand these people's ways, to learn their thoughts as she already admired their virtues. Thus, possibly, and thus only, might her wider intelligence and her higher standard of action one day prove of service in extending and in raising theirs.

And Adam, what does he do ?' she inquired.

' The same as all the rest, ma'am—what he can ; sheep-tending in the meadows, leading horses on the farms, cutting and stacking peat on the Fens, fossil-digging now and again, or following his father when

there's nothing else. He'll be a great loss to me, will Adam ; but he'll be bound to go for a rough-moulder in the tilery at Cutthorpe. He mustn't cross his father, and Daily's set his mind on keeping 'em down to a dozen. He says he haven't stretched his length in bed these four years, by reason of the lot of little ones I'm forced to tuck up at the foot. It's a pity for Adam, too, for he's such a lad for a garden ; and Sir Crowsby Weyland's gardening man's laid by, and a lad wanted at Sodden Farm ; but father's not to be ruled about Sodden Farm.'

'There, then,' said Jessie to herself, 'is the probable secret of Adam's "hunger ;" ' but her next question was abrupt, and apparently irrelevant.

'Mrs. Daily, what's a decoy ?'

Susan Daily explained that it was a sheltered pool in the Fens, in which tamed ducks were kept for the purpose of attract-

ing wild-fowl, to be netted ; that a well-trained dog was needed to help, used to jump over the fences or pipes—called thence a ‘ piper ’—too cunning to bark or disturb the strange fowl ; that her father and the other men about the place used to find lots of sport there once, but that now it was going out, and they didn’t take ten where they used to take a hundred.

Was there any decoy left near Slumsby ?
Mrs. Smith was anxious to visit one.

Yes. There was one, but only one ; and that was on Sodden Fen, at the southern extremity, quite a mile from the farm. You picked your way to it over the ‘ Hards,’ after crossing Diggory’s Dyke. It was a lonely place, and you had to get leave of the owner to go there at all, for fear of disturbing the birds ; but there wouldn’t be any sport till November.

Mrs. Smith didn’t want to see the sport ; she wanted merely to visit the decoy.

Having obtained this information, she then went on into the village to gratify Robert's passion for stilts ; and taking Adam with her, tried also to satisfy his less obvious needs. In this attempt, however, she again failed. The moment had not as yet come in which the growth of personal consciousness would compel Adam to speak of himself.

That a great trouble, the existence of which he had not known hitherto, had in years gone by pressed upon his parents, was the inference which Adam drew from the conversation that he had overheard the night before ; that circumstances had somehow been against them, had possibly even been too hard for them. A great awe and pity filled the boy's heart. The form in which the words were put served to deepen this conclusion. 'The fact is, those four ought never to have been born, and wouldn't have been, but for father's being what he was.'

Adam felt as if he, too, had had his share in that past sorrow ; he and Robert and Noah and Kitty had all somehow been the guilty ones, had all been partakers in that affliction. The son of an absolutely sober man, he had never understood that his mother's father could have been a degraded brute who had turned his only daughter out of doors, and had died a drunkard's death in a ditch the year before Adam was born.

Yet Adam met his parents on the morning of that new mental dawn with none of the shamefacedness which would, it is to be feared, have beset boys educated in carefully selected schools or in jealously guarded homes. One thing his loyal heart had immediately dictated with unquestioning celerity of decision ; it was, that no word of what he had overheard should ever reach his brothers' ears through him. Unlike better born and richer youths, he had

never learnt to steal from his elders for secret discussion facts which they presumably might have desired to withhold. Overhearing in that tiny house was no sin to stain the conscience. A home so narrow as to admit of no concealments precluded the entrance of a whole code of unwritten laws provided by more complex conditions of existence. Now, first, a secret had entered into it—a secret felt by Adam not as an evil, but as a misfortune.

Adam had met one of the dark problems of life in his village under the guise of ‘a misfortune,’ spoken of in free but guarded language over cottage gates. Or, more concretely still, among his own playmates there had not been wanting an especial boy or girl at whom he had seen the finger pointed as briefly ‘a misfortune.’ ‘A terribly lax code of morals?’ Possibly, but, at least, out of its deficiencies this mercy grew, that it stained the soul of no

observant boy or girl with an ill-defined, abhorred, and yet fascinating sense of ill. The village parlance taught a lesson that many a man and woman never learns in a long life of artificially guarded experiences, that such sin is oftenest only the wrong side of sorrow, that from surrounding circumstances are cast the shadows which invest it with a horror of great darkness, or cover it sadly with a merciful veil.

Henceforth, Adam faced companions such as these with no repulsion in his heart, but with a full sense of pity, such as he had never known before. It was his first sorrow thus to suppose himself ousted from the life of his home, and he turned to share it with those less fortunate ones with whom—not without some sense of superiority, such as is too often given to the happy to feel for those less advantageously placed—he had formerly played in the village.

He, Adam Daily, who had never known

actual want or sorrow, who had never been beaten or crossed in his life, as the sons of the Manor House had been browbeaten and caned for a payment of eight hundred guineas between them at school ; he, Adam, had done now with all this. He had gone over in spirit to join the despised ones of the earth, had left the ranks of those who feel themselves to be the deservedly happy, and had somehow, from no fault of his own, become one of those less light of heart : those conscious of infirmity or of blemish somewhere in their lot ; those who are not quite as others are, who know themselves to be somehow on the wrong side of life, and yet whose innocence protests against the cross they bear with their own wills.

There was a boy in Slumsby with a crooked spine, a girl with purple, plum-dyed patches on her face. Adam had stared at these peculiarities often in days gone by, with the hard, unshaded stare of ‘ blind,

bright eyes.' When he met these maimed ones next he turned uneasily away, with a confused sense of new pains he could no longer see and leave unshared. That neither the crooked boy nor the plum-faced girl attributed his averted looks to anything but offensively assumed repugnance was a perfectly natural result. They carried their own burdens with the dull ease of use—he lifted them suddenly with the addition of his own ; and a nature sympathetic enough to undertake such a task has already doubled its pains.

Hearing his mother often express herself as she had done only that very afternoon to Mrs. Smith, when she had declared all her boys and girls to be healthy and straight and good-looking, Adam had hitherto taken it for granted that they were something to be rather proud of. He had never heard the other side of the question as he heard it the night before, when up from the dark-

ness below him his ears had been smitten by the words in which his mother spoke of the existence of 'those four,' and his father, of his intention of sending him out from the home.

It is strange how quickly the youthful mind develops when first invaded by consciousness of individual experience. All the immature thoughts, all the embryo feelings, all the unformulated impressions and opinions that have been growing unconsciously for years, when the breath of life moves over the inchoate mass assume shape, wake, and stir. Strange shapes they take sometimes, unexpected and mistaken forms, as did Adam's, grotesque and ill-adapted for survival; but the mammoth and the plethiosaurus become extinct when they have had their day, and give place to a better order of evolvments. So was it now with Adam's mind, which had hitherto been growing and perfecting itself freely

and unconsciously, as his body had done, whilst engaged in healthy activities under the broad sky of the Fens.

Mr. Daily allowed his wife to send the younger children to school on week-days, and the bigger boys were free to go on Sundays if they chose. He cared but little what was taught them, so long as they learnt to write their names. This was the message sent with every child of the family :

‘ Please, sir, here’s my penny. My name’s so-and-so ; and father says you’re to learn me to write it.’

If questioned as to this fancy, Daily would answer shortly that ‘ A man who couldn’t put his name on to paper didn’t know who he was, and hadn’t any self-respect.’

Adam, therefore, was not wholly uneducated. He had had his few years at school like the rest. He could read a little, a very little, badly, and never for pleasure. He

could scrawl his name as his father desired. He had been to church, and to school too, on Sundays when he was younger ; but of late years since his labour had grown more effective in the cottage garden, which was his pride, he had never thought about going. He believed it to be the manuring properties of the water from the ditch which reeked in front of his home that made his flowers grow to the admiration of all beholders ; but, indeed, it was his own love of them, the instinctive passion of his babyhood, the purposeful devotion of his boyish days ; but then those days were so full of work.

Adam worked in the fields and on the Fens, as his mother had said, till he dragged his limbs, stretched and tired in every muscle, and fell asleep over his supper. He had to turn out at five o'clock in the morning, asleep still, to tumble into his clothing somehow, to pick his dusty

garments from the heap of his brothers' if it was summer, to take them off the bed if it was winter, where all night they had lain to add to coverings too thin to keep the life in anything but four warm-blooded young animals such as himself and his three brothers. In winter the four lay huddled together for economy of heat ; in summer they alternated heads and toes, for the sake of space and air.

On Sundays, there being no enforced labour to perform, Adam in his working clothes would tear to the bottom of the garden, possess himself of a shovel and a spade, seize a rake to which Robert had put a handle of which both were very proud, and when all the people went by smart and clean to church and chapel, there would he stand, a hot and earth-stained boy, digging, hoeing, weeding, all his whole heart in his work ; with no false sentiment of shame, since he had no sense

of wrong-doing—no theatre of consciousness whatever for his simple actions but in the shining of some golden sunflower, or the crimsoning glory of some autumn dahlia.

Here was another point on which the family fell into disgrace in the village, for Adam's father and one or two of his brothers often shared his Sunday labours in the garden-ground. They had a very fair-sized allotment for so small a cottage ; land had been cheap when their dwelling was built, but bricks were dear, so what was lacking in indoor accommodation was made up to them in garden-ground ; and the poultry that they kept at the back, and the ducks that paddled in the ditch in the front, had more space to live in than they.

Adam forsook his garden, however, and put in an unaccustomed appearance at school on the Sunday morning following

his walk with Mrs. Smith. For a second night he had found himself strangely wakeful, listening to the breathings of the others, and to the snorings of Noah, who had got upon his back for want of space in which to turn. Poor parents—poor mother ! had they borne the load of life for years, and did he, Adam, feel as if those long hours would never end. He had never known before how long a night could be, he who always slept as he lay down. He had never seen the stars shine till now through the broken panes of glass above his head. He had never thought about any different world before ; the limitations of this one had been so absolutely unfelt by him. But now that the pressure of its cold arms made him shudder, he looked up through the skylight with some thought of another where the stars shone.

It was in school that Mrs. Smith had invited him to meet her. To school there-

fore Adam would go, and on Sunday, being his only day of leisure.

‘If what she says to you strike you aright, be guided by it ; if not, let it alone,’ was James Daily’s comment on his son’s new line of conduct ; and Adam, equally practical, determined to go and judge for himself.

Unfortunately, he was allotted to a casual teacher whose class was replenished by big lads who came there no oftener than did Adam himself. They were present to take the measure of the new authorities, and not to be behind in events that might turn up.

‘Now, what boy can tell me the meaning of “original sin”?’ the sanguine instructor was asking, as Adam joined the circle. None apparently: and an uneasy silence fell upon the class. Then it was that Adam stepped forward suddenly, and cried :

‘Here, sir !’ his broad chest expanded, his toil-stained hand stretched out to bespeak attention, his fair hair curling

round his open features, and in his kindling eyes the light of conscious mastery of the subject and of his class-mates. Please, sir, I know. It's being born when you ought not.'

'Well, not exactly,' said the discomfited instructor.

The light of knowledge died out of Adam's eyes, and a look of puzzled doubt took its place, whilst the teacher endeavoured to convey the more orthodox view of the subject. He had scarcely finished, however, before the class was thrown into consternation by Adam's dropping the book which had been placed in his hand and turning to leave the room.

'What you have just said now can't be the truth, sir, for it isn't sense ; and so if you please I'll go home to my gardening. I seem to feel better there.'

Adam had got half-way to the door before the astonished young man had had

time to reply, or rather before he could decide how to deal with such an unusual crisis. The boy clearly could not be put into the category of either commonly naughty or stupid boys. There was apparently no rudeness intended, and there was no insult in his manner. In the tones of his voice was no shade of untruthfulness, which could lead even the most prejudiced to suppose the lad was taking offence in order to give it. He was simply, perfectly, genuinely if mistakenly, in earnest.

‘But such ignorance, madam!’ said the young man, addressing Mrs. Smith, who came up to ascertain the cause of the commotion. ‘Such utter, benighted, crass ignorance! How account for it, in a Christian country, in a Christian land? The boy is a mere heathen—a mere heathen!’ he exclaimed in disgust, as Adam’s retreating form made for the door.

Then, as the lady did not immediately reply, the young gentleman added, 'He positively makes his own intelligence the measure of truth.'

'What then? would you have him make yours the measure?' asked Mrs. Smith, not without a quiet smile.

Instead of answering her, the irritated young teacher turned to his class.

'Boys,' he said, 'who is that lad? Do any of you know him? I've never seen him here before.'

'Please, sir, his name's Daily, and his father's the tiler what lives down in the last cottage before you get to Mr. Smith's; and, please, sir, they're a bad lot is Daily's, and you don't never catch 'em inside a church; and mother, she says his grandfather was Topsy Hoston the thatcher, what drowned hisself when he was drunk, in Diggory's Ditch, and the old parson wouldn't let him lay in the churchyard.'

These were the words which arrested Adam's progress and rooted his feet for a never-forgotten instant to the dusty boards ; then bending his head suddenly as he had never bowed it before, his whole face flooded with shame, he blindly felt for the doorway. The crowded room seemed to be filled with eyes that mocked, and fingers that pointed at him alone.

‘Adam! Stay! You came here to learn ; and you must stay either to learn or to teach.’ The voice which overtook him was that of a friend, as the poor lad felt—of his only friend in a world that rejected him. Obedient to her power over him, he waited upon her lips. ‘Boys!’ she cried, ‘listen to me. This is my first Sunday among you. I may have a lesson to give, but I am certain also that I have a beautiful story to learn ; for that I must have a Daily beside me. Adam, come here. In Cut-thorpe Church there is a stone to the blessed

memory of a man named Daily, whose body was buried in the strong walls of the dyke he had built to save his country. I want to hear the history of that martyrdom. He was your ancestor, Adam. You have been born to a most honourable inheritance in being the descendant of so noble a man.'

She paused, weighting her words with the silence that fell upon the attentive room. From the boy who had stigmatized the Dailys as 'a bad lot,' her eye passed slowly till it rested upon Adam's countenance, seeking there for the dawn of sympathetic intelligence. The boy's eyes were luminous, but there was no such immediate response as she had hoped. Perhaps he could not speak for contending emotions. She could not suspect herself of any mistaken estimate of his feeling or capacity. His was a character which interested her deeply, from the first moment of meeting with it ; not merely on the

ground of distinctly elective affinities, but also because the heroic element, manifestly present in his nature, suggested possibilities of moral inheritance. There were latent enthusiasms in the boy's nature which might be awakened in response to her own. The seed of the prophet was in him. He was nothing, perhaps, as yet ; but then in the future he might become everything.

In that school she felt the presence of no kindred mind but his ; she spoke to no other ears. In her heart was a passionate eagerness to reach him, to kindle in his soul the sacred flame which warmed her own. When she arrested his footsteps that morning upon the threshold of knowledge and inspiration, the fuel was laid ready and the moment of illumination had arrived ; but the spark which, blown by her breath, might in an instant have ascended upwards in tongues of fire, had been well-nigh extinguished by the blundering efforts of

another. The smoke thickened, however, before the flame mounted.

‘Diggory Daily!’ stammered Adam. ‘What! him as owned Sodden Fen, where father ’ud be now if he had his rights!’

‘Rights, Adam! Rights! What a word is that! Whose rights was Diggory Daily asserting when he died? Whose rights cost him his life? Was it his own? Answer me that.’

There was no reply. Adam breathed hard, and drew nearer.

‘Boys! You older lads there, tell me this: for whose rights did Diggory Daily perish when his blood flowed over the stones in the chancel of Cutthorpe Church?’

Not a boy in the school but was listening now. All eyes were fixed upon her, all ears waited upon her lips. They evidently had not heard the story, these boys who had been born and reared within a stone’s-throw of the place. Then she

pictured it for them in a few living words. The fresh May morning; the sunlight streaming in through the open doorway of the church; outside, the pale green leaflets of the elms—the same elms, conceivably, under which they themselves had often played; the people crowding up the aisles; the chinking of the money as they paid their dues; the bailiffs and the sheriff's officers; the clattering of the horses' hoofs, and the clashing of the full-armed men. Then, lowering her voice, she told the whole tale to the end.

‘And now I want to know,’ she said, ‘what did Diggory Daily give up his life for? Did he die in defending his possession of Sodden Fen? He had already renounced it. Did he die to save it for his son who was even then ploughing those very acres where some of you have often followed Mr. Smith's cart-horses? Beaten and bruised, the son had already taken refuge in Slumsby

Church here, close by, within a short step of the place where, some eight generations later, Adam now stands. Did he die that his wife might have a comfortable home in the mill that he had built? It was at that moment burning to the ground, and his wife was homeless. Then, did he die, do you suppose, in order that long years afterwards, when he was almost forgotten, Adam Daily, there, and Adam's father should be grand and rich and powerful, should own all the lands between Slumsby and Cutthorpe, and should yield to none but the lord of the manor?

‘I will tell you what he died for. He died that every young lad and boy in this school might be the richer, if not in public property, to be enjoyed by all in the enjoyment of each, at least in a grand and pure and splendid example; in the common possession of one noble predecessor, in the special possession, for one of you at least, of an

ancestor whose name it is an honour to bear ; whose character it may be a God-sent gift to have inherited. If you had your "rights" to the utmost farthing's-worth, Adam, in Sodden Fen, they could be but common rights after all, shared with every boy in this school ; in Diggory Daily's death you have the special right to venerate the memory and to dare to follow in the footsteps of a Christ-like ancestor.'

There were tears in her own eyes as she spoke, but when she turned to dismiss the school, Adam was no longer there : he had fled to the bottom of his own garden, shaken with inward choking sobs. But there in his place before her stood Mr. Smith, nervous and pale. He had heard all, and was coming forward to greet her.



CHAPTER V.

LOVERS AND FRIENDS.

‘ Glen Combe,
Friday.

‘ **M**Y DEAR MR. APERS,
‘ We were really such
great friends once, that now
that something very dreadful has happened
I do not feel as if there was anybody that I
could ask to do something quite disagree-
able for me but you : especially as you
were his oldest friend and were at college
with him, and so you will know better than
anybody else if it is true or not. Some-

body, whose name I promised not to mention, has told me that Leopold used to be very wild, and wasn't at all a nice young man at college.

'They've told me all sorts of things about him, and I want you to write to me—by return of post, please—and tell me if they're true or not. If it is not quite right my writing to you, I'm sure you'll be pleased to get a letter from me all the same, because there isn't anybody else that I could ask ; and somehow Leopold really doesn't seem to be quite as nice as he used to be when I first knew him. That is very awkward, too, because the day is fixed for the 14th, and the cake is finished, all but the ornaments, and my dress is coming home next week. Shouldn't you like to see me in it ? It isn't quite white, because papa took such an interest in having the right tone of colour for my hair. The shade has been copied, he tells me, under his own eye from the

camicia of a Madonna he discovered in the Piazza Montenara, whose hair has absolutely the same lustre as mine. Papa can't leave Rome, but he has sent ever such a lovely piece of sculpture for dear mamma's tomb, which he designed himself: he feels that for him it will "convert Kensal Green into a Campo Santo." He declares that it has afforded him the highest consolation. That, I am afraid, is more than I shall ever do to him, or indeed to anybody else. It is very funny, but it seems to me as if all my life people began to get tired of me very soon; perhaps it is because I get tired of them. Are you bored with Slumsby yet? Do you and Mrs. Apers Smith ever come to an end of one another? Do you know what Leopold says about her? Perhaps I oughtn't to tell you, but, now I've begun, I can't tear up all my letter, and I didn't make him say it, so you must forgive me; but you needn't forgive him at all unless

you like. He says she's "a clever woman, who tries to rivet a broken heart with friendship, philanthropy, and general usefulness."

'Isn't that a horrid idea? That wouldn't be like me one bit, I'm sure. If he or anybody else were to break my heart, I should die right off, I know, before my gold hair had turned silver, and leave to papa the purest consolation of designing me a monument. I wonder if yellow hair ever does turn white. Should you like to see me so? I've cried tears enough to wash all the colour out of mine these days; and that, I expect, is how it will be when we next meet.

'Yours,

'AUREA CAPELLA.'

This young lady, whose name was Aurea Chapel, did but follow her father's example in Italianizing her name. For the twenty

years of his daughter's existence, Mr. Chapel, as the Signor Capella, had resided in Italy. His wife came to England to die, amongst her own relations. She brought her daughter with her. Aurea found admirers in her mother's home, rejected George, accepted Leopold; but neither deaths nor weddings moved Mr. Chapel from his devotion to the vagaries of a dilettante artist's existence in Rome. Aurea, on her side, declared herself sick of miscellaneous society, bored with polyglottic flirtations, and resolute to be the mistress of an established home.

That exact course of life which has been rejected or renounced by its parents has a special charm for the youthful mind at certain stages.

This was the letter which was put into George Apers's hand on Sunday morning, just as Jessie had gone down to the school. Expectation that day in Slumsby was

centred in himself ; and he could not find opportunity to sit down and write to Aurea in full response, until he had escaped from other obligations by legitimate performance. But he folded up the dainty paper and laid it in his choicest pocket, whence it stirred his pulses favourably to the delivery of a very becoming sermon.

It was pleasant that her thoughts should thus have turned towards him. This proof of her confidence in his honour and his truth was a sweeter testimony than he could have dared to dream of. It was characteristic of the sanguine nature of the man, that he immediately picked these plums of enjoyment out of the bitterness with which the letter was leavened ; that pleasure and not pain was the corresponding moral sensation produced by contact of his fingers during the day with the ‘highly-finished vellum-wove Baskerville note.’

As a man of the world and a gentleman, he was under the influence of that well-bred sentiment of mutual protection between man and man, which is the outcome of modern civilization. He would unhesitatingly have classed amongst lapses into primitive instinct any tendency to subordinate this feeling to personal inclination. Aurea's 'Leopold' was in no sense George Apers's chosen friend. On the contrary, the idea of Leopold had become distinctly displeasing to George since the day on which Aurea's choice had been made. Nor had the young men at college been the allies that the maiden imagined. A Londoner who has never been to India fancies that the Smiths' cousin in Peshawur must be rather glad of the patronage of the Browns' uncle at Madras. Miss Brown thinks that a school-friend in Boston must enjoy the privilege of taking tea with her sister-in-law in Colorado. Upon the same principle Aurea Chapel be-

lieved that George Apers at Trinity must have clung to the society of Leopold Stuckley at John's, because both happened to have entered Cambridge at the same time, and to have previously come from the same Devonshire village. As a matter of fact, both had ignored their former relations. Leopold holding George to be at once 'slow and stuck up;' George dismissing Leopold as belonging to a set the boisterous music of whose words and ways was pitched too loud for tolerance by fastidious ears. But all this went for nothing now with George.

As the wearer of an irreproachable black coat, he possessed a sure guide to conduct in the necessity of acting up to his broad-cloth, a necessity in which will be found the most cogent argument in favour of expensive clothing. As a gentleman, George Apers was thankful to be provided with a moral code by society. This code

delivered him from the unpleasant necessity of reopening questions settled for him, once for all, by its agency.

Aurea was not lessened in his eyes by the course which she had taken, as he more than half suspected that she might have been in his sister's. No doubt she had pleasantly sinned against etiquette in invoking his interference between herself and her lover ; and it would be his delicate duty tenderly to hint as much to her ; but then it must not be forgotten that this charming maiden had wandered long in a land where Mrs. Grundy, but lately introduced by Mr. Cook, still spoke indistinctly in a foreign tongue. Why, moreover, should a man fall out with the inexperience which attests his own superior wisdom ? The very sweetness of relationships between the sexes turns upon such feminine expressions of fallibility made to masculine omniscience. The woman who always does the right

thing is the very driest bread of married life. Many a man has been driven to her who does the wrong one, through unspoken fear of such diet. Such an uninteresting morsel, whether as friend, *fiancée*, or wife, it was perfectly certain that Aurea Chapel never would prove.

One immediate difficulty faced George Apers in dealing with Aurea's letter, and that difficulty might be summed up in one word—Jessie. Jessie, as he had often said to himself, had never done justice to Aurea : 'his Aurea,' as he had called her—a lapse for which he reproved himself with shame. Neither had Aurea shown any understanding of his sister ; a circumstance to be accounted for, doubtless, by difference of age and position. How could Aurea sympathize in Jessie's sorrows ? Or Jessie in Aurea's joy, when it involved her own brother's disappointment ?

The expression of emotion by sensitive

people may be checked as effectually in writing, as in speaking, by an unsympathetic or indifferent presence. George Apers did not class his sister thus ; but he was well aware that to taste the full enjoyment of answering Aurea's letter, he must enjoy it alone in his study after Jessie had gone to her bed. As, however, he could not endure for Aurea the few hours' doubt of his reception of her missive which this arrangement would entail, he sat down and wrote her a few lines of warm thanks for her confidence, of assurance that it was not misplaced, and should be requited without loss of time. Then, not without an amused recognition of the schoolboy in the Vicar, he slipped out of the side-gate, intending to carry the letter to the post-office himself, before the beginning of the afternoon service—was met, face to face, by his sister, in close conversation with Mr. Smith, the churchwarden—hesitated, felt small all at once,

and—turned back with the others to the vestry.

Both the letters, his own and Aurea's, remained in his pocket. Neither gave him any satisfaction now. The afternoon sermon was a poor performance. He felt himself to be but a very sorry fellow, disappointing to all expectations, and most of all to his own.

Yet, wherein lay the reason for all this change in action and in feeling? Not in any obligation to consult his sister; he was not weak enough to carry the schoolboy revival so far. Aurea's letter was confidential, and could only be treated as honourably secret. Moreover, whilst courting Jessie's judgment on matters parochial, he never avowedly submitted his secular conduct to her influence. He was not quite man enough to dispense with the limitation of 'woman's province.' Why, then, could he not have held up his head, smiled at his sister, complimented the churchwarden,

posted his letter, and felt at his ease as before?

The difficulty lay deeper — had its hidden root in unconfessed suspicion of the dictates of that social code which formed the ‘gentleman.’ The standard of that code, when tried by Jessie’s criticism, was apt to fall, as she had often shown him, something short of her ideal. Only the afternoon before, when walking with himself and Mr. Smith about the garden, she had urged upon him, with a glowing face, not to rest contented with well-bred achievements, but to be a ‘gentleman’ and something more, ‘a man fired with divine enthusiasm’ for the righting of whatever wrongs happened to lie in his path. And as a corollary thereto he proposed to tell the girl, whom he undoubtedly loved, that as a man it was his duty to leave her to fate and her fortune with such a husband as Leopold, because of the consequences to

himself as a gentleman which might ensue from any outspoken answer to her touchingly unconventional appeal.

‘But what could women know about such matters?’

That was the old question ever new: the question of the past, with which Society, in framing her code, had waived consideration of feminine opinion; the question of the present, with which her timidity rejects its ever-increasing expression: and this was George’s mental ejaculation now.

The woman who presumes to dig to the roots of long-established social growths has in irritated masculine eyes laid aside the ‘lady,’ and, having so done, can with no security be relied upon to ~~represent~~ understand the ‘gentleman.’ Jessie could not be depended upon to accept the dicta of society; neither was it at all certain that she would, having investigated the present crisis for herself, decide it as would any gentleman. Jessie,

therefore, must be kept in the dark, utterly in the dark, as regarded Aurea's letter and its consequences, near or remote to Leopold, to Aurea, and to George.

George could not, indeed, endure the thought that this guileless Aurea should be left to his former acquaintance, who was all that she had dreaded he might be ; but then his duty as a gentleman forbade his interference ; and he feared to face the question which he well knew Jessie would bring forward, whether any higher duty might not possibly suggest his risking the very disagreeable consequences of a different decision. The result of mental conflict, covertly declined rather than boldly faced, was that just at the moment when George Apers again sat down to write, having heard the distant closing of Jessie's bedroom door, disgust and weariness came over him.

The house was quiet enough now. There lay Aurea's letter, but the words which had

been symbols of life in the morning were dead black ink-stains now. He opened and re-read his own glowing reply. It was nauseating. Self-disgust dyed the paper. He tore it into shreds. Written expression of sentiment when the feeling which gave it freshness has changed, meets the writer much as the seventh day's manna met the Israelites.

But why write at all? The post had gone hours ago. Why not let matters take their own course, and settle themselves? He was in no sense bound to interfere. So argued his cowardice and his indolence at once. Aurea would have suffered the pangs of disappointment before a second post could arrive. Was not absolute inaction the best way out of the difficulty? Why commit himself at all? Silence, persisted in, settles all questions, and may perhaps stifle the conscience and save the judgment trouble, although possibly at the expense of the

heart. At any rate, he would not write that day. He could send an answer whenever he chose. Moreover, it sounded best in his own ears, as a reply to imaginary social judgments, to say: 'Miss Chapel appealed to me; but under the very peculiar circumstances of the case, I really did not feel justified in offering any opinion.'

Having arrived at this strictly negative conclusion, he turned down his lamp and went out to smoke.

On the following morning George Apers went with his sister to visit their new friend, at Sodden Farm. The speedy alliance between the churchwarden and his sister was rather surprising to George. Mr. Smith was seventy, Jessie was but twenty-eight; and her husband was not supposed to have quitted the world—he had merely betaken himself indefinitely to an opposite hemisphere. There was, therefore, nothing suggestive in their relations; yet there had been a concentra-

tion in the manner of both as they met him the previous afternoon, which had not escaped even George's preoccupied senses.

The drawing-room parlour in Sodden Farm was an old-fashioned middle-class chamber, musty with six days' weekly disuse. The fender and fire-irons being of steel, and the pride of the housekeeper's heart, were cleaned twice a day, and anointed with fat; it followed that fires must rarely be lit. The curtains wore bags; the mirror wore gauze; the carpet was covered with linen. Yellow wax candles at five shillings a pound might be looked at, but never ignited; the stands which bravely displayed them being of silver, and handsomely polished, were kept in an iron chest under the best bed; the chest was the property of Slumsby Church, and the church-plate enjoyed the same seclusion. All these articles came forth very seldom; but, together with their master, were now duly

prepared for the reception of the new-comers. So much having been said, the furniture need not be mentioned; the veriest tyro among auctioneers would have ventured to catalogue it at a guess. The 'usual articles' were all present, as indeed they had been for the last fifty years: the novelties were conspicuously absent, saving and excepting a yellow paper fly-catcher, which, renewed every autumn, hung just above the centre of the round rosewood table, where the Cupid from Mr. and Mrs. Smith's wedding-cake still disported himself beneath a glass shade.

Mr. Apers being duly seated in the 'gentleman's easy-chair,' his sister in the 'lady's lounge,' with her feet on a Berlin-wool parrot with beaded eyes, Mr. Smith opened the subject most in his thoughts, with less shyness than he had hitherto shown. 'Do you think you were wise, madam, in turning the attention of those lads in the school in

the direction of the communistic tenure of land in any form? You, and your brother also, are no doubt aware that nothing can be more difficult of proof than any disputed claim to landed property, especially in these districts, whether urged by individuals or by communities.'

'In no part of England, I have been told,' said George, 'has legal strife been carried to such a pitch in days gone by. Suits and counter-suits based upon Vermuyden's and later contracts have, it is said, stuffed the Fen Office, anciently existing in the city, with undecipherable documents; and have glutted the Court of Chancery with appeals.'

'My own tenure and that of my father before me,' said Mr. Smith, 'rests solely on purchase. My father acquired the freehold of the Sodden estate from the then lord of the manor, Sir Digby Weyland, the father of the present Lord, Sir Crowsby. We shall have that gentleman down here before long, so I'm

told ; I believe he's expected every day. He has got no wife, as you know, Mrs. Smith ; more's the pity for the village. The old house by Dripping Ferry doesn't suit his widowed sister, and she leaves us pretty much to ourselves down here—except when she wants to turn her boys out to grass, as they say in these parts ; but I hear he's coming alone this summer.'

'I own to greater curiosity about the history of Soddan Fen, Mr. Smith,' said Jessie. 'Mere inquisitiveness I possess, I assure you, sufficient resolution to condemn to starvation ; but this curiosity I have legitimate reasons for desiring to satisfy. Reasons not entirely known as yet to my brother or to yourself.'

'Oh, pray don't divulge them to me,' put in George ; 'in nine cases out of ten when a lady offers you "reasons," Mr. Smith, you may rest assured they are simply excuses. Your experience of "housekeepers" has

doubtless convinced you of that; and in the present instance my sister furnishes, I am certain, no genuine exception to the rule. She is as well aware as I am that she has no business to put you through your paces about the tenure of your lands, and yet she does it.' Mr. Apers smiled pleasantly as he spoke, and gave his hat an extra polish with the sleeve of his coat.

Mr. Smith sat looking from the brother to the sister, anxious to reconcile his duties as a host with the judicial attitude which this turn of the conversation seemed to impose upon him.

'A lady,' he said with humble gallantry, 'is privileged to render no reasons, and with regard to "excuses," sir, as I dare say you've often considered, man made them first, and not woman. Any information I can give you, madam, I shall be proud to furnish. My father copied a memorandum in possession of the late lord at the time of

purchase, which it might interest you to glance at. If you'll excuse me I'll fetch it. I keep it with the church-plate for safety. The memorandum was itself a copy of an extract from the original agreement between Diggory Daily and the "Commissioners of Sewers," as they were called ; I hope you'll excuse the title, madam.'

'Pray don't apologize for history,' interposed George; 'a sewer was a sweet thing enough, until we moderns defiled and defamed it.'

'Was it indeed ?' answered Mr. Smith uneasily.

He knew a great deal more about water-courses than the Vicar was ever likely to know, but he feared that the conversation was sinking to a level too low for a lady's ears. What would his own housekeeper say if she happened to be lingering near the half-opened door ? She never allowed him so much as to allude to a drain in her

presence. Her own precise position in the social scale this worthy person indicated by the ambiguous compound, 'Parlour-house-keeper.' As such she shared his meals in the sitting-room of daily use, after serving them up in the kitchen.

Under penalty of her immediate disappearance, she never suffered him to forget the gentleman in the farmer. A cat was the only animal whose existence upon the premises she consented to observe ; a rose or a cabbage the only product of the land.

Mr. Smith had not been without anxiety lest on the present occasion she should think it her duty to receive his visitors in the drawing-room. He was wrong. The place she had chosen she knew ; nor would she overstep her limit in one direction lest he should ignore it in another. She drew up the blinds, straightened the furniture, gave a last look at the fire-irons, sighed, and withdrew.

‘Mr. Smith,’ said Jessie eagerly, ‘before I attack this document, will you oblige me by telling me one thing? Do you yourself really believe that Diggory Daily lived and died in the way that tradition, and I might also add history, asserts? Do you believe that he intended to convey these lands by a full bequest to the village, and that in point of fact common rights were exercised over them within the next twenty years? I do not ask you, mind, whether you can prove it. That might be quite another matter; but legal proof, as no doubt you will grant me, is not indispensable to effective belief. Proof of faith in religious matters is, for instance, daily given in action which would not be forthcoming in statement.’

‘Take care, Mr. Smith,’ said George; ‘there are claws beneath the cat’s paws. Observe, there are two questions in one: one asked, the other unspoken. My sister

inquires, first : Do you believe certain facts stated ? Your answer, as I take it, in face of this manuscript, will most likely be " Yes." What she does not ask you, but what she means to get out of you, is this— Do you acknowledge certain inferences which she deduces therefrom, such as that the glorious common people who are good enough to be born in the cottages of Slumsby village have a right to all your lands ?'

' That I do not act upon such a conviction is my answer,' said the churchwarden warmly. ' I can assure Mrs. Smith that the popular cry about common rights could with no shadow of reason be got up here, and that the moral claims of the people are as illusory as the legal claims of Daily the tiler.'

' The question of the alienation of Church lands, now, presents to my mind,' said George, ' a far stronger case. If I am to

grant my sister's position, that moral conviction under any given circumstances imposes upon me individually the duty of corresponding action (which I am not prepared to say that I do grant), how am I to greet the lord of the manor the next time that he comes to Dripping Ferry?"

The saving clause in this sentence, it must be remarked, was due to the memory of last night's internal debate. As he made it, his hand went into his pocket, where his fingers played nervously with Aurea's letter.

'As no doubt you, Mr. Smith, are aware,' he continued, 'Sir Crowsby Weyland holds here no fewer than three thousand acres, as to which no question has ever been raised that they were the property of two rival religious houses on the river. The Church quarrelled over the nuts, and secular fingers picked out the kernels. What do you make of that, now, Jessie, with your furor

for righting wrongs? Ought not the Church in Slumsby, in the person of George Apers, her Vicar, to prosecute a claim for those lands ?’

‘Better base it at once, then, George, upon the fact that you wear a strip of white cambric tied about your throat for fourteen hours a day, and that Sir Crowsby Weyland only wears the same for four. That qualification will probably represent, quite as well as any other you may possess, the intentions of the original donor. Between you and Sir Crowsby, I’m inclined to believe that that ancient testator would find not a tie to choose.’

George Apers laughed.

‘There, you see, Mr. Smith—that’s the way she assails me. Better live under a housekeeper, I assure you.’

Mr. Smith glanced uneasily at the door ; but he dared not rise and shut it, knowing that if he did so his tyrant would accuse

him of having seen her behind it ; knowing also that he should be frightened into denying that very indubitable fact.

‘Those acres,’ continued Jessie with animation, ‘we may safely affirm, were bequeathed to the Church by some rich but sinful old person, who, having sucked all possible benefit out of them for his pampered body, was determined to hold them on for the possible good of his needier soul. Or if we are to allow that he was a little less sinful, or a trifle less selfish, why then he had an eye to the poor—priests and people alike—who would profit by the shelter of those religious houses. If you want to observe his intention, and to rob no soul living here or elsewhere of its rights, I should say urge upon Sir Crowsby Weyland’s conscience that he distribute those lands for the common good, and let the testator live in the gain of the poor. Build reading-rooms, club-rooms, and baths;

make playgrounds, gardens, and so forth. Build decent houses, so that thirteen persons no longer sleep in two rooms. Perhaps the first time that James Daily and his wife don't lie five in a bed, they may bless the memory of that early benefactor ; he wished to be prayed for, and blessing is prayer. Who knows but his soul may be eased when they rest, and may be made glad in their joy ! But I do not fancy that the forecast that you, as Vicar of Slumsby, two hundred years later, would keep a footman instead of a parlourmaid, would have smoothed that ancient death-bed. The knowledge that Sir Crowsby Weyland would keep an extra hunter might not have been much less consoling.'

'A crusade against a nobleman's conscience. Yes ; that's ever the way with your irresponsible moralists and critics,' said George. 'Look out, Mr. Smith, we now understand my sister's designs upon

yours. Take my advice, and give your conscience into no man's keeping—not even your Vicar's; how much less into his sister's! Depend upon it, a man whose conscience-keeper is a woman, is the least dependable of mortals.'

'Yes, that is sadly true,' said Jessie; and George was silenced by a fruitless search after the motive which emphasized her words. It never occurred to him that he might find one where she had not meant it—in his own attitude towards her.

'This paper, you will see,' said Mr. Smith, employing the pause of conversation to lay the document before Jessie, 'explains how, "In pursuance of an order of His Majesty King Charles II.'s general Session of Sewers, a commission sat at Dripping Ferry aforesaid, and did decree and ordain that these fens should be taken in hand forthwith; and to that end treated with some foreign undertaker, whose demands being

found very high, and all other neighbouring gentlemen refusing, ‘Dyggorie Dailie,’ yeoman, a person eminently qualified, having a fair estate in the county and a small proportion of the surrounding marsh, out of a noble desire to serve his country, declared that he would be the undertaker thereof himself, upon the terms that had been proposed by the commission to those foreigners.”

‘If you will read on further, you will see that this offer was immediately closed with, and that under several headings following the commissioners decreed :

“That all the grounds so drained should for ever afterwards continue for meadows and pastures ; that the said Dyggorie Dailie, his heirs and assigns, should at their own costs keep and repair all drains and sluices which were to be made, and that in consideration of this great work the said Dailie, his heirs and assigns, should have and enjoy

800 acres of the said fens and marshes, to be allotted to them out of the said Lordship."

' But the gist of the whole matter lies in the sentence which follows, wherein it is decreed, "That if through the neglect of the said Dyggorie Dailie, his heirs or assigns, the above-mentioned grounds should be again surrounded and should so continue for the space of one whole year together, upon transmission of a certificate to that effect into Chancery the charter should be made void ; those who in virtue of having their adjacent lands improved by Dailie's work paid fines to him, his heirs or assigns, should be released from their obligation, and it should be lawful for the original owners of the 800 acres to enter into them again."

' There it all lies, you see, Mrs. Smith, in a nutshell. Diggory Daily assigned the land to the villagers of Slumsby, but such

assignees not being recognised by the adjacent landowners, the fines were not paid ; the repairs therefore could not be maintained, and the deed of gift being thereby rendered void, the property lapsed once more to the Lordship. I don't say that there were not intricacies of detail ; for instance, the claim of the Daily family rests upon the absurd assumption that the lapse was not to the Lordship, but to Diggory Daily himself, in the person of his immediate descendants, as the original owner. But taking it as it stands, it's a marvelously clear case for the Fen-lands, and one which in any case proves your villagers' claims to have lawfully perished two hundred years ago.'

'It would be the grander deed to revive them,' said the inconsequent Jessie.



CHAPTER VI.

A FEW FACTS.

DURING the half-hour that he had sat in Mr. Smith's parlour George's demeanour had been all that could be desired in the very cheerful and agreeable Vicar; but he excused himself from making a third in the expedition to visit the decoy suggested by Jessie. The fact was that his thoughts would no longer afford a trustworthy basis for suitable conversation. He turned off alone for a walk; and as chance, or rather as clerical instinct would have it, his walk led him through

the town of Cutthorpe, into the open doorway of the parish church. A woman was scrubbing the well-worn flagstones, grumbling the while at the churchwardens, who were 'only sixpence a week better than the deacons at Zion Chapel, though the one wouldn't have been boarded a year till Michaelmas, and the other hadn't had a new stone inside it since the days when Parliament was King.'

As a few words of further communication established the fact that this very sixpence was the price of the scrubber's adhesion to Episcopacy, George Apers felt no disposition to dispute the fact that the bargain might be a bad one.

'Why don't you make your son help you—that great lad I see lying there full-length upon the chancel-floor? It's a disgrace to see a boy sleeping at such a time and in such a place.'

'He's none of mine, sir, and he isn't

sleeping ; and if he was, he wouldn't be the first that's had a nap in church. He's Daily's lad, Adam ; and he's been there the best part of an hour. He hasn't troubled me, and I haven't troubled him ; but some one else has—his father, I'll warrant. No doubt but what he's come in here to have it out by himself. He's a queer man is Adam's father. They do say he mounts the thatch, and sits astride the roof at nights when he's burdened in his mind—it's constitutional. I'm all for company myself when I'm out o' sorts.'

' Adam, get up ! what's the matter ? ' said George.

His footsteps approaching down the aisle had not caused any change in the attitude of the recumbent figure. The boy lay with his face pillowed upon his arms. When spoken to thus, he suddenly rose, and seemed inclined to go away without answering. His eyes were heavy, and a dark

stain as of tears covered the last letters of the inscription upon the flat tombstone over which his head had hung. It was the slab which commemorated his ancestor's death.

‘It isn’t sense,’ Adam muttered, pointing with the toe of his boot to the damp spot.

‘What isn’t sense? I don’t know what you mean, my lad.’

‘The reading on the tombstone. No one can make it out. Why do they write it so as it can’t be read? I suppose because they murdered him they was ashamed, and wrote it so.’

‘But it can be read—it’s Latin; and as for the letters, they’re all right. Would you like me to teach you the words? Is that what you want? Listen, then: “*Hic expiravit pro populo mortuus.*” It means, “Here died one slain for the people.” You know who he was? Your ancestor—it was here that he fell.’

‘Would you be so good as to write the words out?’

George did so. The boy took the paper, folded it in his hat, and left the church in silence.

‘Where are you off to now?’ said George, following him, and interested in spite of his preoccupation of thought.

‘To the Union, to see granny. She’s the one for knowing everything,’ said Adam, half turning round.

‘What sort of things do you want to know, now? Let me see if I can’t help you. It’s my business to teach the people here, and I’m glad to find that you’re anxious to learn.’

Adam looked hastily up, scanning the speaker’s face from the broad forehead to the smooth unlined mouth, thence by way of the irreproachable clothing down to the well-cleaned boots. More than doubtfully he answered :

‘What sort of a day’s work might a rough-moulder’s be?’

‘Try the next question, my lad ; I know nothing about that.’

But Adam seemed unable or unwilling to accept the challenge. In silence he trudged on to the Union, George Apers following.

At the Workhouse-gates they met a gentleman on horseback ; a goodly couple they were to look at, both man and horse—both equally well groomed and, it was easy to hazard the guess, both conscious of pedigree. The gentleman, who seemed to have come there on business, was declining to dismount and to entrust his horse to the care of an imbecile-looking old porter who was rubbing up the brass handle of the gate-bell.

‘No, Jones, no ; I’m not coming in. Tell the master, my lad, if you’re going in, that Sir Crowsby Weyland’s waiting to speak to him’—this to Adam. ‘Is that

you, Mr. Apers? We've had the pleasure of meeting before; do you remember that run on Exmoor? Ah, I forget you were not out with the hunt; you confined yourself to the meet. Pleasanter country than this. The late Vicar of Slumsby having at length joined the majority, permit me to tell you how we congratulate ourselves and him upon the change. Not that I'm much here myself, except for the shooting.'

'The living of Slumsby has not given my college much trouble,' observed George; 'the last appointment held good for fifty years.'

'Yes,' said Sir Crowsby, 'and was made in my father's time, a dozen years before I was born. It will be new life for our village to have you and your sister at the Vicarage. I'm off to town to-morrow, to fetch my widowed sister and her sons down here for the boys' holiday; but as soon as I return

we hope to give ourselves the pleasure of calling on Miss Apers.'

'Mrs. Apers Smith,' corrected George.

'Your sister? ah, indeed! I had not heard. By the way, you'll find you're in luck in your churchwarden here, Mr. Apers. Mr. Smith's a staunch supporter of mine, of an independent kind; and he's a thoroughly good fellow, quite a superior order of man for a farmer. A great contrast to his son, I believe, who went to the bad a score of years ago, and stayed there, luckily for everyone concerned; or he'd probably have brought the old man to this'—pointing to the brick building beside them. 'You're paying a visit of inspection, are you? let me introduce you to the master, then. No, I'm not coming in myself, thank you, master. To speak the truth, Mr. Apers, my imagination prefers to deal with failure in the abstract rather than in the concrete form, and clings to success rather than to either.'

‘That’s a good commercial statement,’ said George, smiling.

‘It would be if it were prospective; but when retrospective it’s a sound Conservative sentiment,’ said Sir Crowsby, laughing, and so they parted.

‘Ah, poor gentleman! the last election hit him hard,’ observed the Workhouse guardian, as he ushered Mr. Apers in. ‘Mr. Rout, the tile merchant, ran him close; and they do say he’ll have to find a bride to pay the bill. They say it’s sobered him not a little, and bent his mind on settling down. But his widowed sister and her sons hang on him shamefully. I’ve actually heard it affirmed, sir, that but for him she might as well be in here as many a one that is under my care; but you were saying you wished to see the premises?’

George Apers found himself standing upon a well-kept plot of garden-ground, flanked on two sides by tiny cottages, single-

roomed, and sixteen in number. The main building of the Workhouse stood on the third side of this square. The master hastened to explain that these select cottages were built for the accommodation of old married couples.

‘What a charming arrangement!’ said George, with a sigh. The sigh meant, ‘How gladly would I end my days in such a cot with Aurea!’

A significant smile passed over the master’s keen features.

‘I’ve always felt,’ continued the Vicar, ‘what a hardship it was to separate the poor old husbands and wives; for no earthly reason condemning them, for no fault but their poverty, to a divorce they have not deserved, and adding one crowning sorrow to the sum of their misfortunes.’

An odd noise in his companion’s throat was the only answer George Apers received.

‘How many couples are there in those houses now?’

‘Well, sir, only two. You see, it’s like this—they aren’t used to sitting together and smiling at each other from morning till night. The man, he’s used to go out to his work; and the woman, she’s used to cleaning up the place and to minding the children, to cooking a bit of dinner, to doing the washing and such, and to having a word with her neighbours; so when we put them in those little places, two by two, like they went in the ark, the way they fell to quarrelling was really past belief. We tried them all by turns, and it wasn’t a bit of good. Take a look in, sir, and see how the land lies. A bed and a table and two chairs, you see, and that’s all about it. Nothing to cook, it’s done in the house; nothing to wash, it’s done in the laundry.’

‘Why not have it done in the cottages, and give them something to do?’

‘Think of the extra expense, sir; think of the waste of food, and the giving out of victuals and soap and what not, and the consequent pilfering and plague. ’Tisn’t the fault of the Board. The men have been sent out in the day-time on jobs, and turned in the garden to weed; the wives have been worked in the laundry or kitchen, or sent up to nurse the babies and sick; but the moment they got back into these neat little places, the wrangling was not to be borne. One after another they’d go before the Board, begging and entreating for the love of heaven to be put back into the common rooms. We were forced to oblige them by parting them again. There are some have been tried five or six times, promising and entreating always, and always the same in the end.’

‘But you said there were two houses occupied.’

‘Yes, sir, there are two, and two only;

and in one of them the man's dying—has been paralyzed ever since he came in—and past fighting ; I can show him to you if you please. Here's the cottage—that's him—there he lies.'

' With his wife nursing him, I see.'

' No, sir ; not she. She's in the laundry washing. She doesn't attend to his comforts half as well as the other women do. She presumes on his being her husband, and takes things too easy. As a rule you'd find, sir, as we do, that the wrong wives best nurse the wrong husbands by the time they come to this.'

' This is all very sad,' said George, in surprise.

' Oh dear no, sir ; not at all. Nothing in it whatever ; only common-sense, and human nature when it hasn't had much of a chance.'

' Well ; but the other cottage—who is in that ?'

‘An old couple, sir, that haven’t lived together for a quarter of a century, and so they’ve come to one another again quite fresh at over seventy years of age. For no fault of hers he deserted her, and went off to the colonies, and led a life of the free and easy sort; never wrote her a line, though the poor thing was pining for his company; forced her to go back to service and earn her own living, with two children to pay for. The children grew up—she toiled from morning till night, always bore the best of characters—and after they were married and could earn their own living she began to lay by a little bit of money. Then he comes home, gets scent of the savings, persuades her to take up with him again, and finally brings her to ruin; but as she’s a bit of a saint, there they sit. Good-evening, Mrs. Twiss; here’s a gentleman come to see you.’

Yes, there they sat, she on one side of

the fireplace, placid and calm ; he on the other, moody and cross.

What could these two have to say to one another, as they sat face to face all the day long — she with her good conscience, he with his bad one ? Could he entertain her with stories of his past sins ? Could she touch his sympathies with the recital of her earnest endeavours, which had ended in this ? Why had they not their grandchildren about their knees—she, that she might find comfort for the past ; he, that he might learn hope for the future ?

‘It’s nobody’s fault but their own,’ said the master, chiming in with George’s thoughts. ‘As long as the lower orders are free agents they will come to this.’

But George, as he looked at the picture, gained a sudden insight into what life, thus bared to the quick, might come to be. Stripped of all trappings, empty of possessions, exhausted of hopes, destitute of

duties. Something more than 'a bit of a saint,' was his judgment upon her.

With no books, with no pleasures, with no occupations ; too old to labour, and too stupid to find interest in thought. Without even a necessary wholesome anxiety as to the recurrence of meals. Seated over a fireplace with no kettle to boil, beside a table without a jug upon it ; surrounded by neighbours, with not a soul to drop in. 'To stare at my wife's worn features from morning till night, after I've known them for forty years ! Good heavens ! I should beat the woman myself, and tear every rag of the bedding in pieces !' These were the reflections with which George Apers followed his conductor through the building in search of further instruction. The romance about ending his days with Aurea in a workhouse-room had already come to this.

'Now here is the nursery, Mr. Apers,'

observed the master ; ‘and if it was your sister, Mrs. Apers Smith, I was showing over, I should be forced to request her not to notice the infants. The mothers have, most of them, got no business to have them ; and when ladies come in here setting them up by praising their babies, it does a great deal of harm ; but as men, you see, you and I, sir, know how to prize a baby at its true figure.’

‘Have they been christened?’ said George, asking the only question which could by any possibility occur to his mind in connection with infants.

The master did not receive this question heartily.

‘Oh dear no, sir!’ he said ; ‘we’ve no conveniences for christenings here.’

‘Have you no chaplain ?’

‘Chaplain, sir ? Yes, sir ; but our chaplain would know better. He’s not one to force his private feelings on a mixed

body like the Board, or he would not be where he is. Take a look in here, Mr. Apers ; this is the old women's infirmary.'

'It really isn't worth the gentleman's while,' said a good-looking matron. 'Only this afternoon we've been changing the bedsteads, master ; and all their brains are softening in there now. I've massed them all together, to save the care of minding them. Well, "Fits and Starts," and how are you ? Do you want any sweeties ? Ask this gentleman for some, then.'

So addressed, a poor old woman in the bed nearest the door held up her mouth to be kissed. She was one of a row of fourteen occupants of similar couches, all more or less victims of senile dementia, as the rosy-faced matron had stated.

'Oh, it's kisses this afternoon, is it—not sweeties ?' said the matron, smiling ; 'well, I'll give you one, then : but you ought to know better than to trouble a gentleman.'

Thus gratified, 'Fits and Starts' sank back again laughing.

'As long as I live ! as long as I live !' cried another, in a shrill quaver from the farther end of the room, whilst a bony arm protruding from the bedclothes flourished a broken piece of china in the air.

The matron turned quickly ; but more quickly still, with magpie-like cunning, the treasure was hidden beneath the pillow.

'What does it mean ?' inquired George.

'Well, they have tins in this ward for their food ; they aren't to be trusted with china ; we should have six or eight basins broken up daily. But "Robbins," as we call her, didn't take kindly to food from a tin, and a lady that came here gave her a basin. 'Twas contrary to orders, but you mustn't see everything, and I winked at Robbins's basin for two whole days together ; the third she let it fall and smashed it, as I could have foretold that she would. She

wasn't so far gone then in her head as you see her now, for it's four months ago ; but she took on most cruelly over that basin. We were forced to let her keep the pieces lying on her counterpane for a whole week to come ; if they were missing, she'd disturb the whole place with her cries. But her mind seemed to get worse and worse with the shock, from the very moment that she let the china fall ; bit by bit we got it from her in the night, and she got like a cat that couldn't count her kittens. One of the pieces had the whole figure of a robin on it, with a scarlet breast—it was the colour she held to the most ; so we left her that bit for a comforter, and now she has forgotten the rest. It's that she's got hiding under her pillow. She don't show it me for fear I should take it away, but she'll give you a peep on the sly if you'll ask her. "As long as she lives" she's going to cherish that fragment. We call her "Robbins" from it.'

‘As long as I live,’ the poor creature repeated, half-showing, half-hiding her treasure.

‘But that won’t be long,’ the matron added, as they turned away. ‘She’s had a hard life, and been the mother of fourteen children. Her eldest daughter’s a cook in a nobleman’s family, and comes here once a quarter, in a black silk gown and velvet jacket, just to take a look at her mother, and bring her something she’s got from her place, which hasn’t cost her one farthing, and it’s well if she hasn’t purloined it. It’s a shame to see the respectable servants that haven’t a mite of responsibility on their consciences for the care of their worn-out old parents. The better the wages and the grander the place, the surer you may calculate that the mother’s in the “House.” There’s a lady’s-maid comes here once a year, sir, to visit her mother, in bracelets and satins, and brings her—one orange.

And then, sir, she grumbles and argues because *her* mother isn't better done by, by us ; talks of a feather-bed and a bath, and lectures us all as if we were her servants, drawing our wages from her for the care of her mother. If I was an employer, I'd never take an upper servant, sir, with parents on the rates. In the first houses in London, I know for a fact, there are butlers and housekeepers taking sixty pounds a year bare wages, and endless extras besides, with fathers and mothers in the country unions all up and down the land. The Board can't get at them, and the employers would think it degrading or interfering to recognise the butler's or the lady's-maid's mother ; and so she dies, sir—like “Robbins” there will die—and nobody's any the wiser till the lady's-maid comes crying into her lady's room one morning, and begging her to advance her something out of her wages, because she happens to be rather

hard-up at the moment, and has to go into mourning for her poor dear old mother. After which, having the kindest of hearts, the lady gives her a five-pound note to console her, and she comes out quite a picture in black silk and bugles; and it's well if the parish doesn't bury the mother. Yes, I know all about it, sir; I've been in gentlemen's service myself.'

Standing in the midst of the long room, between the two rows of beds with their imbecile occupants, humiliation was the deepest feeling of George Apers's soul. He could say nothing to them; he could do nothing for them. The master said the right thing, 'This is the peacefulest place in the whole House. They've all the attentions they want, and no minds to make them miserable.' And the matron evidently did the right thing, with willing cheerfulness, by every aged inmate there. But he—he was merely an idle spectator, a not in-

different moralist, a what you will—he hardly knew himself, what. To be from any cause whatever, whether from immaturity, imbecility or an alien tongue, unable to reach the intelligences of your fellow-creatures, is always, to a man of sensitive make, a deeply humiliating experience. It was a relief, therefore, to George to descend to the old men's day-room beneath. Here the master left him for a time.

The old fellows were sitting all about on benches. Here and there they had got the loan of a book or a paper, not exactly new ; but for the most part they seemed listless and apathetic. Signs of animation, however, greeted his entrance. One old man nudged another. ' Here comes the new parson ! Now then, Will, up you speak ! ' Will, a venerable-looking old pauper, came forward, evidently as the recognised orator of the room.

‘ Please, sir, removing the liberty, be you pretty well to do?’

‘ Well, yes, my man; I’m quite well, thank you.’

‘ No, sir, not in your health, but in your circumstances we was meaning?’

In his circumstances! Here was a bold suggestion at the outset.

‘ Not rich enough, certainly, to take you all out of the House, if that’s what you mean.’

‘ Not at all, sir. Once more, accusing the liberty, might we inquire, would twenty pound be a consideration to you now, sir?’

‘ Would twenty pounds be a consideration’ to him? What on earth did the old fellow mean? Were they going to give him a purse in this Workhouse where they had never seen him before? In his surprise he hesitated for an answer. The question was repeated with more insistance.

‘ Would you break the commandments

now, sir, for twenty pounds? Would you “oppress the poor, and him that hath no helper,” for a hot dinner? For a piece of roast pork would you do unto your poorer neighbour as you would not be done by? Would you take his little ewe lamb; would you rob him of his Sunday evening out, and all for twenty pound a year?’

‘Oh! a grievance, I perceive,’ said George to himself; ‘fictitious probably; another candidate for the imbecile ward, clearly.’

‘You wouldn’t be the man as would do all that?’

This was said very earnestly, and half a score of anxious old faces waited around for an answer.

‘Not if I knew it, certainly.’

‘Not if he knowed it; well, then, he’s the parson for us. Lookee here, sir. There’s thirty pound a year paid to this ’ere chaplain here, for to do the service to we of

a Sunday morning, and to read the Bible when it's to be read, to shut up the bookcase and to give out the tracts, and to bury them as 'as a call that way; thirty pound a year ! You may well say it's easy earned. But this 'ere chaplain if he didn't go and strike—struck against thirty pound a year, if you can credit it! So he goes before the Board and speaks 'em easy. If they'd only make it fifty pound a year, he says, he's kindly agreeable to giving 'em a extry sermon, and to singing 'em two hymns of a Sunday evening ; but if he can't get fifty pound for doing of his duty here, he'll go further, he says, trusting to his providential luck. Well, the Board was worked to that extent that some o' them made very free with their languidge. For sixteen Board days there wasn't no settlement come to, by which time, none of their advertisements drawing a new thirty-pounder, they was forced to give in to their

man ; and just, of a Sunday evening, as we poor old chaps was crawling out for a mouthful of fresh air, to have a pipe maybe, or to look up our families, if you'll believe me, we was stopped at the entry ; and now we're everyone of us rung in for that there chaplain's sarmon, and his hymns. And he's put that twenty pound on to his table, sir—lays it out on a hot joint o' Sunday evenings, pudding and vegetables. And what's become of our little bits of suppers, or the mite of 'bacca, and such, our daughters used to give us when we went to visit 'em of a Sunday night? Eats and drinks it all, he do. Now, sir, we heard as you'd come to Slumsby, and it's our wish as you should apply to the Board, and do us our duty of a Sunday morning for thirty pound a year extry in your pocket; and welcome you should be to do it too, and we'd all join in the " Armens " if you'd not lay claim to the job of an evening. The

Board 'ud be your debtor, and us old men too; and we'd take your part against 'em all. I hope you credit what I'm saying, sir, for it's all Gospel truth, as should be spoke to a parson.'

'It's nearly all a pack of lies, Williams; and I trust Mr. Apers believes nothing of the sort,' said the master, who had just re-entered. 'You all went out and got drunk on Sunday night, you know you did; and it was a scandalous nuisance and disgrace. And the chaplain put another service on in your best interests, let me tell you; and it's very presuming of you old people to offer your opinions as to what took place between him and the Board. That's no concern of yours. You keep sober and mind your own conduct, and you'll find work enough to do.'

Was this question the supreme exception, then, which could be truthfully stated in one form? George Apers doubted it still, when,

having closed the door upon the discomfited grumblers, his companion remarked :

‘ That man, sir, was a cobbler that couldn’t stick to his last, but must perpetually be going off to street-preaching and drinking. He pawned the boots they gave him to patch, got half a pint of gin with the coppers, and then went round raving of hell-fire in a way fit to make your hair stand on end. He does just the same again now any Sunday evening that we let him out, and his acquaintances stand him a treat. Naturally, therefore, he hates sitting sober and listening to the chaplain’s temperate discourse. Now it’s the turn of the old ladies, sir ; this is their day-room. You’ll find Grandmother Daily sitting in there, and I’ll leave you to pay her your visit. She’s a character is Mrs. Daily.’

Another long room with windows on one side, deal tables down the centre, deal benches below them ; but on either side of

the fireplace, where even in the month of June a comfortable fire burned, two cushioned armchairs. 'Old Sally' reigned in one. She had been an occupant of that room for thirty years; the old woman who queened it in the other was Grandmother Daily, as was evident since her grandson was standing by her side. Whatever the answers might have been which she had given to the questions with which Adam had assailed her, they had lifted a load from the lad's mind, to judge from the brightened expression of his face. He looked several inches taller, and many steps nearer to manhood than when he had quitted the Vicar in the courtyard.

Between grandmother and grandson there was evidently a mutual understanding, beneficial to both; easier to maintain, probably, than between Adam the son and the simple house-mother in Slumsby. It was to his grandmother that Adam's hopes

naturally turned in his threatened dismissal from home, and apprenticeship in the tile-yard. It was to her that his griefs and ambitions were hinted; from her lips that he sought confirmation of the lately learnt histories of his forerunners Hoston and Daily. Her brief statements steadied his wavering convictions. Her blunt assertions chased away his fears. How doubt his parentage or suspect his destiny when this old woman spoke so plainly and so forcibly, with such a strength of hidden fire, with such a wealth of unspent energy? George, ignorant of the cause, yet noted the effects in the boy's altered demeanour, as his eye glanced round the room.

It was a homely scene, but not without its counterbalancing attractions, and the visitor no longer wondered that its common comfort was preferred to the monotony of separate bliss. Rows of brown basins with a deep chestnut-coloured liquid were stand-

ing to warm on the fender and on the hobs : this was the tea, chief luxury of the old ladies' room. Coarse Congou, contracted for at eighteenpence a pound, boiled up with soda and brown sugar, and served out in portions.

‘Taste it, sir,’ said Grandmother Daily; and George did as she desired.

Hitherto, instinctively or purposely, he had been adopting something of his sister's position as the interested observer of life, the earnest seeker after knowledge for future usefulness, if it might be ; now the thought occurred to him that the time for action was certainly come. Circumstances were favourable to his assuming his normal position of a teacher. No local authority was present to criticize. These intelligences before him must undoubtedly be classed as inferior to his own. He was an educated man and a clergyman ; they were worn-out old peasant wives. There

must be something in which he might suitably instruct them.

‘ You are all at work, I see, mending your shoes.’

Grandmother Daily, as spokeswoman, hastened to show that they were ‘botching’ the ill-shapen list shoes worn by them within doors. ‘Mondays,’ she added, ‘is shoe-shifting day. Each pair’s worn in-different week by week about. On Mondays one set’s given out, and last week’s is called in and mended. Nobody can’t name a single slipper their own. They say as they’re worn out the evenest so, and last best.’

George began to wonder how he should have relished this communistic possession of shoe-soles, had every man’s boots been called in and redistributed weekly in college ; but wisely refraining, upon insufficient data, from criticism, he merely suggested reading to them whilst they sat at their work.

Thereupon ancient 'Sally' rose up, deliberately turned her chair to the wall, and sat with her bent back to the company.

'She's a Papist—she don't face the Scriptures,' explained Mrs. Daily ; 'but we've a chaplain, sir, and he's paid to read the Bible to us, and more than that. It's his work—let him do it. It's a pity you should put yourself about to help him while he's strong and healthy. We was reading before you came in. My grandson Adam has brought us a paper. His father sent it to me ; but Adam isn't much hand at the names.'

Somewhat unwillingly, George took the paper, and 'old Sally' turned round. He found it to be a copy of *Lloyd's Weekly News* of the week before. It contained a highly exciting account of the foundering of a monster ship laden with emigrants. But it was not the description of shipwreck and storm that these old people wanted to hear. Words of such magnitude bred no

corresponding ideas in their minds ; rather they dwarfed their own imaginations. No ; the names, the list of the lost—the Johns and the Smiths and the Henrys, the common appellatives of common seamen—those, and those alone, assumed shapes sufficiently concrete for their intellects. A name was a sign, the sign of a man—of such a man as might have called any one of them ‘Mother’—as might have gone ashore in the ‘Wash,’ or sunk with his boat in the Humber.

“ Henry North, able-bodied seaman.
Richard Davis, stoker’s assistant.
Samuel Sharpe, third engineer.”

‘Ah!’ sighed each old woman, yielding in her turn a tribute to the world of meaning in the common sound.

“ Alfred Smith, ordinary seaman.
Peter Price, cook’s boy.
Henry Dally, steerage passenger.”

‘My boy, my boy! My own nephy—my born sister’s son!’ wailed Grandmother Daily, on a sudden throwing the coarse workhouse apron up over her head, and rocking herself to and fro in despair. He had sailed from Southampton, and this must be he: and his mother ‘a widow with nine little orphans.’

Meanwhile, Adam stood silently by. He had never seen his uncle, and could not pretend to care. Why should he?

With a view if it might be to console, George Apers kindly inquired:

‘His name, then, was Henry?’

‘No; it was Dick, but it would never be read on his tombstone.’

‘Was it then Dally, spelt with two *l*’s?’

Grandmother Daily knew nothing of letters, written or printed.

‘Spelt how you pleased, it was Daily—Daily, same as my own and my lad’s—and now he was gone to the bottom, poor dear!’

‘ Oh! then your sister and you married brothers—I see.’

‘ Not we ; but it stood to sense and reason that her husband ’ud be brother to me. I shall soon have none left of my own.’

‘ And was this “ Dick Daily ” on his way to Australia?’

‘ To Australy? No ; he set sail for Ameriky, and never ’ud get there no more!’

‘ Well, then, if his name was neither Dally nor Henry, and if Australia wasn’t the place he took ship for,’ George Apers thought, ‘ he might confidently venture to assure Mrs. Daily that this poor fellow was not her nephew.’

‘ Not her nephew! Not her own sister’s son, and him lying dead at the bottom of the sea! Who ’ud have the face to declare such a thing, with the marriage-lines framed and hung up in her poor sister’s bedroom?’

To his amazement, Mr. Apers discovered that he had said and done quite the wrong

thing. In pouring cold water upon hot feeling he had generated angry smoke. Grandmother Daily cherished her griefs as a sign of distinction. In the dreary level of workhouse equality he had sought to rob her of her pre-eminence in sorrow; and to be first in some form was manifestly to Grandmother Daily the salt which digested her parish bread.

Removing the canvas apron from her head, the old woman rose to her feet. Her fine black eyes flashed with indignation; tragic feeling lent dignity to her attitude, whilst she stood with one hand resting on her grandson's shoulder, the other uplifted in the air in angry denunciation.

As Deborah the prophetess of old might have spoken, she spoke:

‘Have we not even a claim to our sorrows, but the rich must come here and explain them away? You’ve robbed us among you of Sodden Fen—eight hundred good

acres redeemed from the floods by our own namesake and kinsman ; and here, when I'm wailing over my dead, and these poor souls are gathered about to feel with me, you must step in to deny us our rights even in our afflictions !'

' Say another word to insult the parson, Grandmother Daily, and I'll chuck this same shoe at your head !' said a rival of equal warmth of character from the opposite end of the room. ' I don't believe as your nephys a-feeding the fishes any more than I am myself ; and you ought to be ashamed, after bringing up your son James to be the talk of the parish, to be letting on so before your grandson. I know my place, I do ; and I'd have you to know yours, which is what you've forgotten this long time.'

With these words, and with no further ado, the jealous individual pitched both her shoes at Mrs. Daily's head, and the scrim-

mage immediately spread. Adam, however, came to the rescue. It had already been his fate to receive upon his yellow head a load of thatch intended for the Vicar's ; now he once more, and this time purposely, interposed his rough locks to protect George Apers's well-brushed hair.

So James Daily's 'independence' came from this old mother, did it? She must have had enough of it and to spare, to judge from appearances. Workhouse diet hadn't starved it out of her.

'What more can I tell you?' she answered impatiently, in response to Adam's well-meant endeavours to divert her thoughts to himself. 'Haven't I answered you all the history of the family—when and where your father and mother was born and was married; when that silly body Hoston, your other grandmother, was took, and the tale of her ne'er-do-well partner? If you want to be off going into the tile-yard you must find

the soft side of yer father, and I'd like to see you do that.'

'*You* persuade him, granny. It'll break my heart to go in the brick-yard and give up the gardening.'

'Ask *him* there'—pointing at George, who was busily endeavouring to restore order—'to take you as gardener, and then send your father here straight off to me, and I'll see what can be done; but don't you reckon on nothing. And you submit, mind; submit to yer father, and my best blessing go with you. Sorry you should have come in for a bit of a shindy, sir'—this to George, with the air of a queen—'but their manners does slip them so in the House, living alone without any gentle-folk.'

'I'm afraid, sir, they've shown you their sorriest behaviour,' said his former conductor apologetically, as he saw Mr. Apers to the outer gate. 'They're a strange lot of

women in there, and strangers always excite them.'

'I should have much pleasure in looking in again,' said George, 'and in bringing my sister with me. It would very much interest her.'

The master looked doubtful, as he stood with his hand on the gate.

'Well, sir, if there was anyone in particular from your own parish that Mrs. Smith stepped in to visit, no doubt there might be no objection; but as a general rule, you'll excuse my observing that we're forced to be very particular: with callers especially. The Board, sir, is not very partial to ladies. There's a prejudice against it on that ground, as I'm very well aware. But only those that have had the experience can credit the consequences of admitting the charitable public into the "House." Kind-hearted ladies in all states of feeling, with their bags stuffed with groceries and

their pockets full of tracts ; free-spoken ministers of all denominations ; writers and reformers, preachers and reporters, have all taken us up. We're the fashion, Mr. Apers—the height of the fashion, though you mightn't believe it.'

'Times are changed, certainly,' said George, 'since the days when Dickens wrote "Oliver Twist ;" but you owe your popularity to him none the less.'

At the mention of the well-worn name, the master seemed stung with impatience.

'Oliver Twist, sir,' he said, 'had a very great deal to answer for the day that he asked for "more." It really is time, sir,' he added, laughing, 'that Oliver Twist was dead and buried. Historic he may be, representative he is not any longer. I put it to you now, Mr. Apers, as a gentleman of common-sense and judgment : what do you make of scented-soap brought into the Workhouse in shilling cakes, because old

Sally complained that the hard water cut up her fingers and our stuff “poisoned the cracks”? What do you say to boxes of night-lights for “Fits and Starts” to burn us all in our beds? What do you make, sir, of tooth-brushes given the old women all round, when they couldn’t find a grinder among them; and a hair-brush, Mr. Apers, of the electric sort, to scratch the skull of a bareheaded old pauper that growled of the headache? What do you say, sir, to pictures and china, to crosses and fur boots and cushions, to lock-ups and boxes and books, and what not? One lady she dosed them with globules; another, she sent them a kitten; and as for flowers—enough twice a week to cover a nobleman’s tombstone! If every one of those feeling souls would but lend a hand to stem the rising tide of pauperism instead of smoothing the life in the Workhouse, they’d be doing a greater service; but then it would cost them more

in personal trouble and outlay. Flowers, and kittens, and hymns, and soap soothe their sympathetic feelings, cost them next to nothing in money and trouble, and us treble their value in disputes and disorder. The fact is this, sir: the unreasoning public throws upon the Board, and us its officials, the management of a great social problem, at the lowest figure; shrieks at any increase in the rates, demands from us the thankless task of making bricks—and ornamental ones, too—without straw, exacts from us the endless toil of practical management and unpopular economy, and reserves to itself the sweet and easy job of pouring out the sentiment.'

'From corrected sentiments, then, master, we must trust that in time amended actions may proceed.—Well, Adam, what do you want now?' said George; for the lad was still at his heels, and appeared to be listening attentively to the whole of this discourse.

‘Please, sir, only to say that as soon as ever I’m a man, I’ll take my old granny out of the House. I mean to keep her instead of a wife.’

‘Easy renunciation of fifteen years,’ sighed the Vicar.

If Aurea’s Leopold now would have come to the same conclusion, George Apers’s path in life would have seemed very much clearer.



CHAPTER VII.

‘ATHWART THE GLOOMING FLATS.’

BENEATH the aspens which fringed Diggory's Dyke, Mr. Smith and Jessie strolled slowly towards the hidden shelter of the decoy. The only secluded greenery in the neighbourhood of the level farmstead was to be found here. The clear black water in the peat ditches mirrored an unclouded sky, sedge-warblers called to each other from the reedy by-ways, strange frogs exchanged salutes as hoarsely as in their native France ; the sunshine of the long summer day rolled

shimmering clouds of light over the edge of Scadden Fen, and through the rich grasses of broad pasture-land the wind swept with a stirring sound as of the wash of waves.

These wide-open spaces of the fen-lands bring a sense of freedom and emancipation all their own. The very nature of the country, lying as it does spread out at the feet, invites to perpetual and easily realizable progress. Vast ranges of the earth's surface viewed from some mountain-top may inflate a man's bosom with the imagination of greater achievements ; but the environment of these still, calm spaces has an elevating influence peculiarly its own. The manifold intersections of the fens break no sense of continuity; the eye ranges at will from one slightly undulating distance to another, and midway between the extent of these almost perfect horizons assigns to the human spirit its place, neither on the mountain-tops nor in the valleys beneath, but midway between

two infinities, the one before, the other behind. Even if his hut be as cramped as was Daily's cottage, here a man may find his world as wide as his brain can picture it. The very monotony of the tranquil scenery soothes his mind, confined elsewhere in narrow or ill-adjusted surroundings. Hither come no jostling multitudes with agitating suggestions of change. Here comes no haste ; it has been left behind in the city. Pity that, with the space to spare, a man should not get outside class prejudice, and view it as a ring-fence, suitable mostly for the lighting of fires.

So thought Jessie, eliminating, one by one, the indefinite but alluring possibilities which time and place suggested to her. She had yet another set of more definite possibilities to hint to her companion—hints fraught with the power of widening his future life, but she hesitated and awaited a further opportunity.

In the region of the decoy, willows, elsewhere pollarded, had been left to grow at will, and stretched graceful arms overhead, beckoning waving fingers as though in triumph at their stunted neighbours' lesser growth. Here and there the surrounding fens were dotted with black peat-stacks, darkening like funereal pyres the smiling features of the land. Diggory's Dyke was full of water-lilies. As they passed along, thousands of snow-white and golden-yellow cups floated restfully upon its peaceful waters, indisputable owners of the stream, let who would assert conflicting human claims. With them only the dewy arrow-head and azure myosotis strove, separated by the blood-streaked intervention of some crimsoning dock-leaf.

In the distance, by the river's margin, might be vaguely seen a dreamlike procession of six barges all in tow, bearing loads of peat and planks down to the mills

at Cutthorpe. Nearer, the discordant voices of the bargees would have stung the ears as they lashed the horses into leaping the gates and gullies that came athwart their course ; but where Jessie and her companion stood, noise and effort were alike subdued to the quiet sequence of a waking dream by the intervention of a mile or more of ground.

Here and there, nearer at home, a mower, with a scarlet cap in shape and hue like a begonia flower, swayed monotonously to and fro, whilst he passed his scythe through the ripe rye-grass down in the Fifty-acre. On the knolls of rising ground the cattle stood in groups, flicking their tails at flies ; by the river's bank the horses gathered in nervous knots, or waded in the stream. And the highest point in all that level landscape was the foolish outline of a solitary calf, separated by some abnormal folly from his clan, perched upon a barrow

of earth wherein turnips were stored, and bleating to the wind-driven arms of the confronting mill for indications of the way he should get back again. The mill itself flung lazy shafts, white squared with black, in mockery of its prayers ; whilst the driving-wheel, pieced in red and blue, spoke only in the praises of industrious poverty which had so harmoniously repaired it.

They had penetrated now into the leafy avenues that led to the ensnaring-pool. A willow that had split at the base, roots in air, bathed its limbs in the stream ; its pale grey leaflets, coral-tipped for lack of earthy nourishment, splashed the water in its course, parting it into dew-drops as human fingers might have done. The tame ducks dived and rose to the surface between the broad smooth leaves of the water-lily ; all round the rushes stood sentry, bowing their feathery heads and clashing their long brown spears for arms ; nearer to the margin

water - ranunculus and blue forget-me-not sprang at their feet; whilst gaudy eyed insects and azure-winged dragonflies rose from their kingdom in the luscious grasses.

‘It’s a place to be a dragonfly, or butterfly, or a moorhen in,’ said Jessie; ‘but hardly a tame man or woman.’

‘See it in November, then,’ said Mr. Smith, uninfected by her enthusiasm; ‘its beauty only comes of being undisturbed in summer. At this time of year scarcely a soul comes by. The wild birds will not show till August, and then there will not be ten where there used to be a hundred.’

Mr. Smith then embarked upon an old man’s account of a sport, the interest of which had departed for himself years ago : out of which, indeed, the spirit had fled on the wings of the wild-fowl that came no longer, as in days he remembered, whirling down upon the solitary pool. But he found an absent-minded listener.

Jessie, who had lent him her ears only, and scarcely her attention, as they came thither from the house, now barely responded at all to his conscientious description of the bygone duties of dogs, men, and decoy-ducks ; of the former uses of side-screens, nets, fences, and pipes or conduits.

Absorbed in her own train of thought, Mrs. Smith was careful of interrupting the tirade of the well-meaning showman; till its end came, at length, with a heavy sigh and an abrupt change of tone on the part of the speaker.

‘This place,’ he said, ‘has sad associations for me, madam. I come here now but very seldom, and never without a bitter renewing of the memory of a certain occasion, now twenty years ago, when I formerly stood as I stand now by this pool.’ He struggled for self-possession, and then, leaning upon one of the fences, continued : ‘ You told me just now, Mrs. Smith, that

it would be "a grand thing" to restore to the people what you are pleased to call "their rights" in Sodden Fen; well, I have only to answer you plainly, I have waited indeed for an opportunity to do so, that to give them such a right would cost me personally almost infinitely little. The only conceivable interest which for me could survive my hold on these lands, lay in the hope of my own son's inheritance. In the apparent impossibility of hearing tidings of him, there is no private person whom it would interest me to name as my successor. The man who has children may possibly claim full credit for renunciation of family partialities in favour of public spirit; but the man who has none makes but little personal sacrifice, if any, when his will benefits strangers in kind at the expense of strangers in kin. Take my case, now: there lies that will of mine waiting to be signed in my desk at home. I

had intended to ask you and your brother to act as my witnesses—I shall ask you still—but, as ever, something withheld me. Well, I tell you plainly, madam, I've been utterly divided in my mind between leaving the Sodden estate to her Majesty the Queen, or to Cutthorpe Union, to build a new infirmary.

‘Ah! you may smile; but there's a good deal to be said in favour of either arrangement. As a guardian, I've learnt what a tight fit it is with the rates in these parts. You can't let them out a bit without bringing so many more labouring families on them, that you'll be forced to repeat the operation in a twelvemonth's time; yet the accommodation in the Union infirmary for the sick and aged is far from being what it ought, and there's room for a benefactor to step in and give them a helping hand. On the other side, there's a great deal to be said in favour of leaving

my lands to the Crown. Her Majesty's a good Queen, and a good woman, and she is blessed with a large family of sons and daughters. You may be sure that any property you left her would be advantageously disposed of, or properly maintained. I've always been one of her most loyal subjects, and there would be a kind of satisfaction to my mind in feeling that I'd done my best to serve the State after I was dead, as well as I had done the Church while I was alive. But the lawyers, either way, find difficulties. Therefore, you see that as long as my son does not return, and so long as neither wife nor child comes to claim in right of my son, I'm open to conversion by you. Probably you might find me an easy convert; and I should take small credit to myself if I played the benefactor to Slumsby to-morrow by a gift of the title-deeds of Sodden Fen. When my son left me I disinherited him, and told him

so; years ago now I re-instated him in rights he has never come to claim.'

Jessie's attention was absorbing enough now. Earnestly drinking in every word that the old man spoke, she stood facing him, both hands clasped upon the railing of the fence over which he also was leaning. Singularly free from self-consciousness was her attitude; the tension of the fingers only proving how intense was her interest in following him.

'May all your wishes in life, my dear lady, be as well within range of realization,' said Mr. Smith, endeavouring to fill a pause of sound with one of his old-fashioned efforts of politeness.

'Ah! dear Mr. Smith,' said she, 'ideals converted into realities become subject to quite a new set of laws in the change, which not unfrequently results in the mere substitution of the impossible for the improbable. The child never realizes the unattainability

of the rainbow until the sun-streaked drops of water fall upon him. But may I ask, how have the lawyers settled the question about this difficult document of yours?

‘The draft, madam, is drawn up in favour of my son, my Henry. There you see his initials, “H.S.,” cut everywhere upon this fence. Henry Smith, same name as your own; but I’m not aware if similarly spelt.’

‘It is too common to be a name,’ said Jessie.

‘Just so; or in the event of his not returning within a given time, or of his death being legally proved, to his wife, if such should come forward, again with conclusive proof; or to any child he might have left behind him. To son, wife, or child the property goes in the will that I’m anxious to obtain your immediate assistance in signing. Any further arrangement must be added by codicil. Perhaps on your next visit you will oblige me? I’m a lonely old

man; and even for such a favour must depend upon the courtesy of strangers, unless prepared to disregard the curiosity of inferiors.'

'Ask my brother by all means, Mr. Smith; but I must beg you to excuse me. I am not a widow, and from circumstances connected with my marriage I consider myself disqualified from rendering you this trifling service. Find me some other.'

'Pardon me, I had thought you were widowed.'

'You have spoken to me of your great loss, Mr. Smith, in your son, and I too will speak to you of mine. I am not a widow, but I am that far sadder thing—a wife undeservedly deserted.'

Mr. Smith bowed his head in a tribute of silent respect.

'Mr. Smith,' she continued, with deep feeling, 'in looking at those widows who are widows indeed, I have often been tempted

to say that some women's worst misery is better than others' best happiness, and to envy their sorrows has to me been a greater temptation than to covet their joys.' Then, pressing both her hands on his arm, she pleaded, with long-hidden emotion : ' Mr. Smith, let me speak, I entreat you. It is so horrible to live always stifling the cry of one's own heart, with a smile upon one's face and light words on one's lips ! I am alone ! I am forsaken by the only man on earth I ever cared for. I tell you, Mr. Smith, standing here beneath these broad silent heavens, I'd be thankful—thankful even to have him in the grave, for the right to weep openly tears which the sympathy of others might respect and allow. But now the grave is in my own heart only. My life is a dance over a thinly frozen sea of death ; if I pause, I am submerged ; I rise to the surface only to recommence my enforced activity. I rest at my peril. Some

day I shall go to the bottom for the last time. The thought comes to me like a dream of rest.'

The old man found no answer for a moment. Perhaps she had chosen him as a confidant, divining his incapacity for criticism ; mere absence of critical faculty being in itself a great recommendation where fullness of sympathy cannot be looked for. Her head was bowed down over her clasped fingers, and he laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

'I am not speaking on impulse,' she said, lifting her head shortly, and looking at him steadily, with eyes which had shed no tears. 'It is not the least likely that I, who am so well accustomed to perpetual self-restraint, should ever relax my rule except upon sufficient grounds, and upon intention more or less deliberate. I meant to speak to you. I knew that I should do it ever since I saw you first. It may astonish you that I should have been so precipitate; but I will explain

it all some day soon. If it seems strange to you now, it will not be so for long. I brought you here to this quiet place on purpose that we might speak together undisturbed, that you might tell me of your lost son, and that I might tell you of my lost husband. Here we have no listeners, and healing, and hope, and forgiveness seem possible under these still, broad skies; rest, even, if here one might lie down and die.'

'My dear,' he said—'forgive me if I call you so, for you are young enough to be at least my daughter.'

'Yes, call me so,' she said.

'My dear, I do not like to hear so young a woman talk of death with dry eyes. It is well enough for an old man like myself; my hopes are all behind me: but in youth hope dies hard, and to you must still be possible. Believe me, I can understand you in what you just now said. In looking at those men who are fathers still—with sons

dead in the sight of others in this world, but alive to them in another—I too have realized that their deepest sorrow was indeed joy to mine ; for my son, alive to others, is dead only to me ! On this very spot, where you and I now stand, twenty years ago he and I stood together for the last time. From that very fence he aimed his gun at his father's head. It was the result of an angry scene, in which he, half drunk, had espoused the cause of a poacher, persecuted, as he in his boyish passion held, by me. His “friends,” as he called them, might always be found in the outcasts, the lawless, the poacher—the very tramp on the highway. His early habit of drinking was acquired, I am certain, from no thirst for the stuff, but from a sheer craving for fellowship with every base chap that he held to be somehow kept on the wrong side of the wall.

“Noble,” do you call it ? No doubt

there was gold in the lump ; but such a perversion of judgment—such a confusion of duties ! Had I no claims on his confidence, his father—his sole surviving parent and guardian ? He always sided against me in any question of class ; and any ne'er-do-well on the farm had my son's ear sooner than I. My voice, my commands, my entreaties only drove him the quicker into the arms of those whom every right-thinking mind must despise. The marvel is, where did he learn it ? It seemed bred in the bone ; and yet he came of an honest and upright set of progenitors on his dear mother's side and on mine. The result was what might have been looked for : in return for his partizanship, these scoundrels taught him their vices—or one of their vices, I ought to have said—for I never had reason to think him depraved. He drank in their company : that was enough. But indeed I was to blame—I was to blame, too. He was not

himself. He was not sober ; and he was only a lad—a wild lad of sixteen years—as untrained and as unbroken as a year-old colt. I cast him off after that, and told him that never during my lifetime, nor after my death, need he hope for a farthing from me, however poor he might chance to become, nor for any token of recognition. And now it seems to me that when I creep up to heaven's gate—as maybe I shall shortly creep, for I've been getting feebler of late—the great Father up there will ask me what I have done with my son, and He will cast me off also in my turn. Believe me, my dear, to have been forsaken is as nothing compared with the agony, the remorse of having yourself cast off—flung away in a moment of personal anger—the body and soul maybe of another ; and that other, one dearer to you than your own life ! Believe me, for dead hopes gentle sepulture may still be found ; but for

living remorse there is no grave in this world, nor, as it often seems to me, may one be found in any other.'

What a change had come over these two in externals! He—the humble, stooping, diffident man—stood upright now, robed in the dignity wherewith long experience of life and sorrow invests the aged when they have the power to claim it. She—the vivacious, outwardly cheerful, and slightly opinionative woman—appeared in her true character, quiet and confiding as a tired child; the self-assertion of which she was sometimes accused by ordinary observers being but the veil with which she hid the real dependence of a womanly nature, thrust back upon itself for support.

Mr. Smith now turned towards their homeward path, and she clung to the old man's arm, suiting her ordinarily quick step to his deliberate paces. In his simple words she recognised the outcome of a

wisdom purchased with his heart's anguish, and not by any effort of brain. He was not clever, nor learned, nor acute ; he knew few things, had seen few men and fewer women, and no other country : but the things which were his he had plucked from his own thorny experience with bleeding hands—he had given his life to their learning ; and the effort that it cost him to share his grief with her was visible in the agitation which momentarily shook his spare frame, as the wind bows the poplars and passes by. In the worn features of his face, the history of his suffering was written legibly enough henceforth for Jessie—lending dignity, and refinement, and interest to what otherwise might have seemed homely and plain.

‘ Will you not tell me more of your son ? ’ she said gently. ‘ Did you never get any further tidings of him ? ’

‘ I will answer you quite plainly, Mrs.

Smith. Just at first I felt he was well lost. I was very angry; and until my passion cooled, I took no notice of his absence. Age has cooled it now ; but I was a hot-tempered man in my younger days.'

'It is hard to believe that you were so, my dear old friend,' she said, pressing his arm. 'Well, go on, please, with your story.'

'When I did begin to make inquiries and to advertise, no answers came; and somehow, I could not bear circulating my loss at all freely. It seemed an impossible thing to me, brought up all my life on this country farm, to go out into the world with my sorrow and let every careless outsider into the most hidden secrets of my soul. Anyway, the months and years rolled by. Presently, I told my story; but no answering message ever came.'

'Then what made you think of a wife or a child? Was it mere supposition, or have

you some notion of such a possibility ? Have you made this will, that you tell me of, at a venture ?'

'Not quite. Some few years back a hint was brought to me, not only that my son was alive, but that he had a wife and child, —that he had deserted them and gone to Australia. Since that day I have looked in the face of every beggar wife and child, of every passing tramp that comes this way ; I have given them food, and help, and shelter. None has ever been refused, lest in turning away any from my gate I might once more be rejecting my own flesh and blood ; but they have never come—they have never come ; and now I begin to fear they will be too late for me.'

'But why seek for them only amongst such people as beggars and tramps ? Have you a reason ?'

'I have. Those evil combinations, the Trades Unions, some years ago sent a dele-

gate here ; and an enterprising friend of mine, urged by a curiosity that I must confess I cannot understand, subsequently went north to judge for himself by attending one of their meetings. There, upon the platform, making the most violent speech of the night, was a man whom he told me instantly recalled to his recollection my misguided son Henry. This speaker he described to me as a handsome, bold, gentlemanly fellow, well-built, developed of course out of his certainty, but immediately exciting his interest from some curious resemblance to the impetuous lad with whom he had often carried a gun over these familiar footways in bygone years. By admission, the speaker was a farmer's son, and had at one time of his life been a bailiff on a gentleman's estate. He professed to tell the labourers listening to him, things which he knew and had observed through his own opportunities ; and he lashed his

hearers up by a furious denunciation of farmers and of landed proprietors. He had known them to hate them all his life long, so he told his hearers ; stating that he had often fought the battle of labour covertly, before he was able to espouse the cause openly.

‘ On returning home a week or two later, my farmer friend immediately made known his suspicions to me, and I went up north to judge for myself ; but the young man was gone. He had sailed for Australia as the pioneer of an emigration agency for farm-labourers and agriculturists ; that was all I could learn. His commission would lead him to be a perpetual rover in uncertain localities and for uncertain times. Rumour said that he had left a wife and child behind him. I charged the authoritative representatives of the Union to forward information of his movements to me ; but I have never received any. No

notice has ever been taken of my most anxious petition. But, indeed, on observing my anxiety, my friend seemed to change his mind, declared that he had probably been mistaken, that I had attached too much importance to his fancy by half, and entreated me to dismiss from my mind his previous statement. I believe he was alarmed by the effect he had produced.

‘Now, I have told you my story, and I want you to consult your brother about it. It seemed easier to me to speak to you than to him. You are both cleverer than I am, and have seen more of the world. I should wish, if it were possible, before my days are ended, to take any measure that still might be practicable for the recovery of my son. You especially, Mrs. Smith—who seem to me, more than any person I ever met, to enter into the heart of others’ sorrows—I should be unutterably grateful if you could suggest to me any line of con-

duct, any steps that I still might take in hopes that even now my son might close my dying eyes ; or, if it were the case that he had married and had, perhaps, left little children in the old country, that I might find again in my grandchild the little innocent boy that used to run by my side over these fields and fens. Tell me, my dear lady, for I am a very inexperienced old man in practical matters, what would you do if you were in my place ?'

' You had better ask me, dear father,' she said, ' what have I done, being in your place ?'

Sobs shook her voice ; finding which the old man, greatly disturbed at having upset her, began a process of soothing and apology, blaming himself for having troubled her, assuring her how gladly, if he were capable of it, he would be or do anything to be of use to her, begging her, at her leisure, to think over what he

had said, and to consult her brother about it.

‘Now, you will not be troubled any longer by anything I may have told you, or I shall blame myself greatly. You have done me a great favour,’ he said, at parting, ‘in taking this quiet walk with me ; and the mere hope that you will give your thoughts at some moments of leisure to my case, and will, if it commends itself to your judgment, ask the same favour of your brother, lifts a load from my mind.’

‘And you will not sign that loyal or philanthropic will just yet ?’ she said, smiling ; long habits of self-control rendering it easy to her to regain the mastery over all unusual expression of feeling.

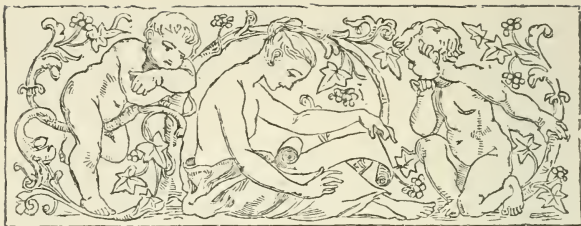
‘Well, the fact of the matter is this, Mrs. Smith—the lawyers hereabouts declare they don’t know how to draw up a will in favour of the Queen, and they seem very doubtful about the infirmity. They think that they

must go to London about such a business as that.'

'Well, then, don't buy their tickets for them without consulting me. Now I must be off, for I want to look in at James Daily's by the way.'

And she went ; but not before, to her companion's supreme astonishment, she had lifted his hand to her lips, her whole face colouring with feeling.

What if his housekeeper saw it ! There could be nothing more likely, for she was always shutting the windows.



CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

THE first object that met Jessie's eye at the breakfast-table next day was a letter addressed to herself by Aurea Chapel, begging her attendance and her brother's at the wedding, to take place next week, with Leopold Stuckley.

Jessie was surprised; she had no reason to count upon such an invitation. Under the circumstances it appeared to her to have been dictated by questionable taste. Her brother's refusal might surely be counted upon as a matter of course; he

would, she imagined, be little likely to desire to occupy, figuratively, the position of guest without a wedding-garment at the feast. For herself, she shrank from the vulgar display and the forced mirth which are apt to distinguish such ceremonies, which disguise the solemnity of lifelong obligations with sorry jests, and degrade the expression of the deepest emotions to the level of bibulous utterances. That precise combination of religion, the world, and the flesh, to be met with most frequently at orthodox weddings, offended her principles, violated her opinions, and simply disgusted her taste.

Without further comment upon the letter than an intimation of her own intention not to be present, Jessie handed it to her brother, who read it, played with his breakfast in an altered manner, and quickly left the room.

Jessie, ignorant of the previous letter

from Aurea, which still lay in his safest keeping, was startled by his change of manner, and by his precipitate retreat, into the conviction that his love for 'Golden-hair' had been a deeper thing than she had known of. How she had mistaken him ! In her self-accusation she blamed the mental preoccupation which had led her in her own troubles to neglect the signs of his.

Yet how was it possible, she asked herself, that such a man as he undoubtedly was, could care for such a girl as she held Aurea Chapel to be ? What could he find beneath the gold that his own fancy had not bred there ? Being a deeply reasonable woman, however, she dismissed the question with a remembrance ; for she did not forget that her half-brother George had expressed the same feeling when she married their father's secretary and estate agent, Henry Smith.

'What could she see in the fellow beyond

a handsome exterior, cleverer conversation and more agreeable manners than might always be met with in men of his class ?' That was what others asked. What she saw in him was a spiritual and mental kinsman, an enthusiast for her ideals, a would-be righter of social wrongs, a lover of the people whom she loved, a possible uplifter and saviour of society, her fellow-worker and guide, and the immediate inspirer of her enthusiasm. She was wrong, perhaps : the man in himself was none of these things ; indeed, the sequel seemed to prove as much to others—to her it only proved a purpose delayed, but yet to be fulfilled ; a life marred, but not lost. The man was not yet that which he was meant to be ; but some day he would rise to the height of that which she alone had seen in him, whether she knew it or not. For three years he and she had been about her father's fields and farms together on errands

beneficial to the poorer tenants. For three years he had indoctrinated her with notions on the subject of popular rights strangely at variance with the prejudices of her family ; and in her ready philanthropy he found the surest advocate of the tenets he sought to teach her. Seeds deeply sown in a nature so rich as hers lastingly flourished : could she suspect, inexperienced girl as she was, that in the friend who had brought them to her they had but a surface-growth where self-love had pricked the scanty soil ?

Jessie Apers was but sixteen when her father's mental and bodily incapacities led to the introduction of Henry Smith into the family as secretary, manager of the estate, and companion to her brother in his country pursuits. The position which Smith thus occupied was an anomalous one, something superior to a bailiff, and inferior to a tutor. As a result, Jessie's step-mother regarded

the girl's attachment to him as she might have done her esteem of the groom.

The second Mrs. Apers's own heart had never spoken until the peerage gave it leave. Externals were everything to her ; not from what a man was in himself, but from the setting of his circumstances did he derive his value in her estimation. It therefore never occurred to her to question the wisdom of an arrangement by which the secretary and the daughter of the house worked together for common ends, spoke together a common language, were thrown together by special sympathy in enthusiasms foreign to that place and family. Fortunately, the Nemesis of family pride may often be met with thus, at its heels. For three years no word had been spoken restricting the secretary in his friendship with Jessie ; then the storm broke. The young lady declared him a gentleman, and requested her step-mother to treat him as

such. Mrs. Apers was coldly contemptuous, and in the incapacity of her husband appealed to her son. George, who was but a lad, boylike, wondered what his sister could find in the fellow; and between them, he and his mother gave the agent his dismissal.

Then, although they did not know it, and Jessie only learnt it with other bitter facts later in life, Henry Smith, the hitherto irreproachable secretary, had a despairing fit of drinking. He appeared in Jessie's presence before they parted with a haggard face and bloodshot eyes, and she, woman-like, attributed these evidences of disorder solely to grief at his banishment from her company.

This evident proof of the reality of his affection touched her deeply. She clung with fidelity to her choice, as such a girl would be sure to do; informed her step-mother, when stung by reproaches, that she

would never marry any other man; wrote to him at intervals; and finally, escaped from moral persecution which she could no longer endure by marrying him when she came of age. She was independent, so far as £300 a year, which came to her in right of her own mother, could make her so; and her father's consent was not to be thought of, simply because Mr. Apers had long become incapable of consenting to anything, or of furthering anything, even the prolongation of his own unfortunately paralyzed existence.

There were no other sons or daughters. Jessie and George were therefore all the more to each other. The young man had a kind heart, and much faith in his half-sister. When he could be made to believe that she really meant it, he offered to stand by her, and even to espouse her cause against that of his own mother, whose judgment he did not highly esteem; but

Jessie declined absolutely to permit him to involve himself in her fortunes.

Not until the day before they were married did Henry Smith divulge the secret of his family and of his father's abode, and then to Jessie only. To do him justice, he told his intended wife the whole story, omitting nothing of his flight from Sodden Fen, nor of his successful concealment of his identity since. He justified this concealment by the declaration, that having abandoned his home in early life, he would not again return to it, when to do so would mean to sue for forgiveness he had no right to expect. Further, having been expressly cast off by his father in youth, he would not again communicate with him, when such a course might be construed into an intention to claim an inheritance his own action had justly forfeited.

To Jessie's partial judgment, there seemed at the time something not alto-

gether mistaken in this latter feeling. But when giving the too trustful girl this plausible account of his history, there was one confession which Henry Smith neglected to make—it was that of the habit which had led to the quarrel with his father, and Jessie had not then learnt to suspect him.

Not seeing her way at once clearly through all his intricacies of conduct, Jessie listened and sighed ; certain only that it must be her duty at the earliest opportunity to reconcile husband and father. She spoke ; but in answer to earnest entreaties, her husband retorted by pointing to her own relations with her step-mother. He declined to observe that their cases were different; yet he had been a lad beneath the rule of a reasonable father, she a woman grown when she asserted her independence. She, her own mistress by her father's living death and her dead mother's bequest,

had been required to direct her conduct by the prejudices of a step-mother whom it was impossible to respect ; he, a mere boy, had refused to submit to the government of a kind-hearted though hot-tempered father. She followed her conscience and her judgment in claiming her independence ; he violated the one, and had been incapable of the other, when he had asserted his. But he could not or would not see the difference, and Jessie's lips were thus constantly closed on the subject.

At the time of their marriage, Henry Smith was employed as an organizing agent of the Trades Unions. His wife's money enabled him to devote his energies more unreservedly than he had yet been in a position to do to the cause of the labourer. They moved about constantly as occasion called them, making a home in a succession of lodgings, happy for a brief period in their possession of each other, and she, at

least, in her faith in a better future for others which their efforts were to serve to accomplish. Yet, through every hour's content, the one great cause of trouble was ever new for Jessie. How long would her husband persist in the alienation from his father which had led him to ignore his existence? To this soon were to be added other and more poignant sources of suffering.

Henry Smith grew restless, tired of his work, his wife, and of himself, and began to talk of leaving the country for a land of greater individual and national freedom. Through these impatient lapses from the restraint of duty, his wife made the first discovery—to her the saddest of all—that his love of the people had its root primarily in love of self.

Now first she perceived that whilst ready enough to lay upon the altar the cherished possessions and prejudices of others, he

spared to take of his own. Now, for the first time, she reflected that he had had everything to gain, where she had had all things material to lose in their marriage. For his love's sake she would have held the world well lost; but what if the love were not won, although the world was lost!

Was it indeed the case that not as a saviour, but as a sharer by choice in lower tastes and habits he had lived among the people, to his own abasement rather than their elevation? That not out of sympathy with their good and pity for their hindrances had he tolerated the evil that was among them, but from real indifference to vice. All this the young wife had begun to fear; but she was as yet unaware that her husband could be not merely a passive spectator, but also an actual sharer in vice of one sort at least. This also was to come, and came at the end of two years.

She was to have accompanied him to a meeting of factory operatives out on strike, whom he was to address, in a manufacturing town; but their child was ill, and she stayed at home, leaving him thus without the usual restraint of her society. The child was suddenly taken worse, and in the early morning hours, as she sat with her dying baby upon her knees, her husband staggered back to her in a state which she could no longer, as upon former occasions, mistake for the disorder of grief. A dead hope and a degraded love were her memories of that fatal night.

Well, children die and husbands come back drunk in hundreds of hovels in the land: these are but common sorrows after all, shared with many a cottage wife whose woes have never travelled farther than the next street; but then this woman who so shared in humble sorrows was without the limitations assigned by narrower mental

conditions. Hers was a capacity for pain as for joy, quickened by activity of intellect, and by a sense of moral degradation in the presence of vice, which was the product of educated sympathies.

Her husband rushed from her presence, in the first shock of his disgraceful awakening, as he had once before fled from his father's home on the Fens; yet when she came to find herself thus childless, and to all intents and purposes a widow, the first distinct feeling which brought her any comfort was a consciousness of simple fellowship in grief with those by her former world called 'common.'

She would not choose to have been protected by artificial safeguards or by the provisions of station from a deep, true, personal knowledge of the actual life of men. The things that these toiling, sorrowing men and women around her knew and suffered, she too would know and suffer, rather

than, by availing herself of adventitious surroundings, heighten for one of them the effects of seemingly uneven contrast. She desired no footpath selected for her feet ; rather she rejoiced to tread the broad highway of daily life in company with the toil-stained and heavy-laden multitude. And as the years went on, and in spite of all her inquiries her husband never returned to her, she threw herself more and more into the life of the people, which was henceforth to be her life.

Jessie's brother George gave her a home in his curate's lodgings in the manufacturing town where he worked before he came to Slumsby ; but her husband sent her no message, no word of leave-taking. He seemed to have removed himself entirely out of her path. She heard, indeed, that he had accepted an offer of the Trades to act as Emigration Agent for the labourers, and had sailed for Australia ; but for a consider-

able period even upon this point she was without certainty.

Up to the time that her removal to Slumsby threw her into his father's way, Henry Smith had sent his wife neither letter nor sign of life; but her love for him had in his absence the more easily condoned his offences, finding in his abrupt departure even matter for hope, as a token of possibly shamefaced remorse.

In the class from which Jessie had sprung, family misfortunes are apt to be hidden like signs of disgrace. Such untoward accidents of existence as wealth cannot exclude, must persistently be ignored. Undeniable failures, infirmities, and defects must, if possible, be consigned by the denial of perpetual silence to seeming oblivion: and nothing less to his credit than an honourable death must ever be mentioned of a well-connected man.

Jessie's step-mother, therefore, made no inquiries as to the disappearance of her

daughter's unwelcome husband, and was relieved that his absence the better enabled her completely to ignore his actual existence. To her brother George, Jessie was in reality less the wife of his father's bailiff and secretary, Henry Smith—who had gone to Australia indefinitely, after some sort of unexplained break-down, which occurred at the death of their child—than *his* sister, whose sensitiveness his unshaken love forbade him to wound by further intrusion into the matter. But there is a simple community in grief amongst those whose histories are least often told, and in that honest genuine fellowship Jessie Smith would share, less for her own sake than for that of others.

This woman, whose chosen people were of no particular set or family, and of no particular station or rank in society, but who were selected solely for what they were in themselves, felt presently a strange joy in the thought—I, too, can go among com-

mon men and common women, and can say to them alone : ‘ I, too, am a sharer in common sorrows, and partaker in griefs which the world holds vulgar. To me too, poor cottage wife, the husband has come home changed; ~~from~~ me too, village mother, death has stolen the baby in my arms.’

Often after speaking with a calm voice words of sympathy to such as these, the pain which had cut her heart as she uttered them would quiver in her breast for hours; but since in their candid simplicity they showed her their sorrows, she would at any cost avow her own, lest to them she should seem the spectator of a day. Had she consulted her own feelings merely, she would often have withheld the facts of her griefs from inadequate translation as to their effects by less sensitive natures; but rather than seem as one who came among them from another sphere, calmly listening to details of sin and sorrow remote from her avowed if not from

her real experience, it was better that she should suffer from having spoken. It was better that they, judging by themselves, should underestimate the extent and nature of her grief, than that she by her silence should drive the sense of loneliness or of class-alienation home to one simple-minded woman such as Susan, or to one morbidly distrustful man such as James Daily.

‘I too, have been deserted by my husband,’ she would often say to such an one, ‘just as you have been. No, I am not indeed chargeable to the parish, so that is worse for you; but then you have your children, and my comfortable home and all that it contains does not make up to me quite so much as you suppose. Think what you would do yourself with empty arms and an empty heart in a big house, with no trustful little children to teach you to believe in love, with no happy faces to pillow on your breast, with no husband to come home

to you when the day's work is done, and no willing work to do for them all the day long ! We are more even in our lots than you can understand.'

In all this there was no reasoned adoption of sentiment—it was the purely natural outcome of a true and single mind ; of a mind clinging to those conditions which form the basis of life, to the rejection, often, of the superstructure artificially reared upon it ; of a mind, therefore, which found itself little agitated by the troubles of society—by fashionable afflictions involving mainly the externals of existence—but which was stirred to its deepest depths by genuine woes of whatever nature and wherever met.

Intellectual cultivation, quickened imagination, and nerves rendered sensitive by inheritance, may indeed constitute superior claims for sympathy ; but nothing can be said in legitimate defence of that fashionable estimate of sorrow which takes account of

the social status of the sufferer as such. There is probably no human being who suffers as little upon this earth as the well-to-do man or woman who combines social advantages with normal intelligence and a fine sense of selection from the inferior world.

When Jessie and her brother came to Slumsby Vicarage, she alone knew that she should find herself somewhere in the neighbourhood of her husband's boyish home ; but she had not known that the connection with his father was to be so near and intimate. Her purposely planned interview with Mr. Smith, in the seclusion of the decoy, had been keenly affecting to her. Eagerly looked for and deeply felt, it had served to stir to the depths those emotions of sorrow in the loss of her husband, and of despair of his ever returning to her, which had brooded in her soul, unshared by any relative, for more than four years.

She pined to divulge her identity to the old man, and she fully purposed yet to do so ; but as she had never yet told her husband's real story, even to her brother, a difficulty lay before her in the disclosure of facts so long and so carefully guarded ; moreover, for the old man's own sake, too sudden an avowal might be undesirable. Circumstances, however, clearly indicated some speedy development, in which the affection of wife and father might warmly unite for the recovery of the absent husband and son. Then, what about Sodden Fen and the chances of popular inheritance ?

Well might Jessie tell Mr. Smith that the instant of realization most frequently converts the improbable into the impossible. At the moment in which he was inviting her to attempt his conversion to her views with regard to the people's claims on the Fen, and was bidding her at the outset to entertain the best hopes of success, her

husband seemed to rise up and to come between them, wresting the inheritance out of her hand.

There were difficulties in the situation which might well need thinking over. If she helped Mr. Smith to recover his son—in herself regaining a husband—she would personally be a sharer in the profit, and a partner in the self-seeking convention by which Sodden Fen was withheld from the people in moral, if not legal, violation of its blood-stained charter. Her husband's father no doubt was blameless, since his conscience was clear in the matter ; but Jessie felt that when once her husband, with her aid and consent, succeeded his father in possession of the Sodden estate, she could never again look upon the land but with eyes of the people whose hopes she had cheated.

Could her husband be brought to see with her eyes and to renounce the estate,

which, after all, he had never expected to inherit, having during a lifetime believed it forfeited by his boyish sin ? Vain notion, dismissed as soon as conceived ! Pride had kept him absent during his father's health and strength, and it was morally certain that he would never consent to sue for forgiveness ; but, dear as independence and pride might be to him—dearer even than Sodden Fen—once let him know that he might preserve both, and he would return to benefit by the change in his father's disposition.

Ever since her husband had told her the story of his sin against his father, Jessie had been accustomed to consider his paternal inheritance as justly and irrevocably forfeited. Then when she came to Slumsby, heard the historical tradition of Diggory Daily's popular bequest, and met Mr. Smith in the flesh, her mind had fastened upon the restitution of Sodden Fen

as the one growth of good clearly intended to be the final end of so much ill. The longing to be personally instrumental in bringing about such a result had been at the root of the strong hold the question had immediately taken upon her imagination.

It was a strange combination of chances which seemed thus doubly to place Sodden Fen in her hand, yet in neither case to give her possession ; for true possession argues the right of renunciation, and that right alone was the one that she coveted.

Mr. Smith must no doubt be allowed to sign the will that he had ready prepared, which bequeathed Sodden Fen to his son ; and failing him, to her unknown self as his wife. Together, he and she must combine to find out that husband ; and having found him, she must be prepared, as mistress of Sodden Fen, for the lie that her life would give to her teaching.

‘George,’ she said to her brother that

evening, 'will you go down to the farm to-morrow to witness Mr. Smith's signature?'

'What have you taken up with Mr. Smith so for?' was the answer somewhat impatiently given. 'It appears to me that Mr. Smith's private affairs don't concern us; but there is another matter that I wished to speak to you about: with regard to this invitation to Miss Chapel's wedding, Jessie, I intend to accept it. You will decline, I suppose?'

'I will offer up my feelings if the sacrifice will save yours, George; otherwise, I should prefer to stay at home.'

'Stay, then,' he said sadly, 'for you can do nothing for me in the matter.'

'I will tell you why I have "taken up Mr. Smith so," George, if you please.'

'A case of mutual confession, eh? Reserve it until I return from this wedding. I shall run down home, Jessie, overnight, and have a look at my mother and father.'

Jessie, noting that he was thoroughly upset by the sight of Aurea's invitation, felt that it was no moment in which to make her disclosure, and suffered him to depart accordingly.

END OF VOL. I.



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